



SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 1/25/2022

To: Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District

Department or Agency Name(s): Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District

Staff Name and Phone Number: Louisa Morris, 565-1537

Vote Requirement: 4/5th

Supervisory District(s): 1st

Title:

El Recreo Conservation Easement Acquisition

Recommended Action:

Adopt a resolution of the Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to:

- A) Authorize up to \$898,000 and escrow costs for the acquisition of the El Recreo conservation easement;
- B) Determine that the acquisition is consistent with the Sonoma County General Plan;
- C) Determine that the acquisition is consistent with the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District's Expenditure Plan;
- D) Make certain determinations pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act;
- E) Authorize all other actions to complete this transaction.

(First District) (4/5th Vote Required)

Executive Summary:

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District is proposing to purchase a conservation easement over the 289-acre El Recreo property near Kenwood, in Sonoma County, California. The conservation easement will protect the scenic and natural resource values of the property, which is located in the southern Mayacamas Mountains, off Pythian Road and adjacent to Hood Mountain Regional Park.

Discussion:

Property Characteristics/Project Significance

Portions of the El Recreo property are visible from Highway 12, and Hood Mountain Regional Park is adjacent to the property on two sides. The property has been used as a rural family retreat for several decades. The land is held in six assessor's parcels and is reported to have five legal parcels, due to Certificates of Compliance. It was formerly improved with two residences, both of which were completely destroyed in the Glass Fire. Current site improvements include a narrow, paved access road, some perimeter fencing, a well and water storage system, two working septic systems, a swimming pool with a concrete deck, an outdoor kitchen structure, a fenced-in orchard, and the foundations of the two former residences.

The property features mountainous meadow, oak woodland and forest habitat that was partially burned

during the Tubbs Fire in October 2017 and the Glass Fire in October 2020. The landowners are actively managing vegetation on the property to address past and future wildlife impacts, and the conservation easement reduces the potential number of home sites in this fire-prone area, which is just outside of Santa Rosa. This property is located adjacent to the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative.

Elevations on the El Recreo property range from 800 to 1800 feet. There is a large bowl-shaped meadow area near the center of the property (where the two homes were located) that is surrounded by mountains. Mount Hood Creek runs south along portions of the property's eastern boundary and drains into Sonoma Creek, and Badger Creek runs west along the northern boundary and drains into Santa Rosa Creek.

Project Structure

Ag + Open Space staff has negotiated a conservation easement that limits the property to two legal parcels under one single ownership, preserves the property's scenic and greenbelt qualities, and protects the property's natural resources, including water and wildlands. There are two designated building envelopes for up to two residences and their related outbuildings (13.6 acres and 0.5 acres in size), a designated agricultural area (6 acres), and an outdoor storage area. Minor changes to the conservation easement designation area shapes may be required by the surveyor, so that they conform with ground features that can be surveyed; these will not change the total easement designation area acreages or acreage of the protected areas.

Conformance with Adopted Plans

Vital Lands Initiative

The El Recreo property is identified in the Vital Lands Initiative as an essential and important greenbelt area. Conserving this property meets the following **Community Identity Goals** as described in the Vital Lands Initiative (VLI):

- Protect unique and scenic landscapes.
- Protect priority greenbelt areas - an area of open land that surrounds a community.
- Protect lands that provide visual relief from urbanized areas and highly traveled roads, including the most visible ridgelines and mountaintops and valleys.

In terms of groundwater and riparian habitat, conservation of the El Recreo property is essential to the following VLI **Water Goals**:

- Protect the highest priority riparian corridors and headwater streams.
- Protect the highest priority groundwater basins and recharge areas.

Finally, in terms of conservation of biodiversity, this project accomplishes the following VLI **Wildlands Goals**:

- Protect the highest priority old-growth and mature hardwood and conifer forests.
- Protect the highest priority oak woodlands, shrublands, grassland and other non-woody vegetation.
- Protect rare, unique, or particularly diverse vegetation communities.
- Protect the highest priority habitats for rare, unique, or special-status terrestrial plants and animals.
- Protect lands critical for supporting high native biodiversity.
- Protect critical wildlife movement corridors and intact habitat areas.

Sonoma County General Plan 2020

The project furthers several goals and policies in Sonoma County's General Plan 2020, specifically in the Land Use, Open Space and Resource Conservation, and Water Resources Elements as noted below:

- Maintain important open space areas between and around the county's cities in a largely open or natural character with

- low intensities of development. (Goal LU-5)
- Preservation of important scenic features. (Goal LU-10)
- Encourage conservation of undeveloped land, open space, and agricultural lands, protection of water and soil quality, restoration of ecosystems, and minimization or elimination of the disruption of existing natural ecosystems and flood plains. (Policy LU-11f)
- Identify and preserve roadside landscapes that have a high visual quality, as they contribute to the living environment of local residents and to the County's tourism economy. (Goal OSRC-3)
- Preserve the unique rural and natural character of Sonoma County for residents, businesses, visitors and future generations. (Goal OSRC-6)
- Protect and enhance the County's natural habitats and diverse plant and animal communities. (Goal OSRC-7)
- Identify and protect native vegetation and wildlife, particularly occurrences of special status species, wetlands, sensitive natural communities, woodlands, and areas of essential habitat connectivity. (Objective OSRC-7.1)
- Maintain connectivity between natural habitat areas. (Objective OSRC-7.5)
- In areas outside the Urban Service Areas, encourage property owners to utilize wildlife friendly fencing. (Policy OSRC-7d)
- Protect existing groundwater recharge areas. (Objective WR-2.3)

Ag + Open Space's Expenditure Plan

The Project is consistent with Ag + Open Space's Expenditure Plan, because it preserves biotic habitat areas, scenic landscape units, and scenic corridors.

Fiscal Oversight Committee Review and Approval

This acquisition and conservation easement appraisal were reviewed and approved by Ag + Open Space's Fiscal Oversight Committee on October 7, 2021, in Resolution 2021-005.

CEQA

Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.28(1)(A)&(C) and Cal. Code of Regs. Tit. 14, , § 15325(a) & (b), the acquisition of this conservation easement is exempt from CEQA because the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the natural condition of the property, including plant and animal habitats, and for continuing agricultural use of the land. This conservation easement acquisition is also exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15317 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, because the purpose of the acquisition is to maintain the open space character of the area.

Prior Board Actions:

N/A

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 21-22 Adopted	FY 22-23 Projected	FY 23-24 Projected
Budgeted Expenses	\$898,000		
Additional Appropriation Requested	\$0		
Total Expenditures	\$898,000		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other	\$898,000		

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Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$898,000		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

Ag + Open Space has adequate appropriations in its FY 21-22 budget for its \$898,000 conservation easement acquisition contribution, which is funded from Sonoma County voter-approved Measure F.

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

n/a

Attachments:

1. General Plan Map 2020
2. Location Map
3. Site Map
4. Resolution

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:

1. Certificate of Acceptance
2. Notice of Exemption
3. Conservation Easement
4. El Recreo project structure map