

VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE

Increasing the Scale, Pace, and Equity of Land
Conservation in Sonoma County

November 8, 2022



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SONOMA COUNTY

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LAND FOR LIFE

AGENDA

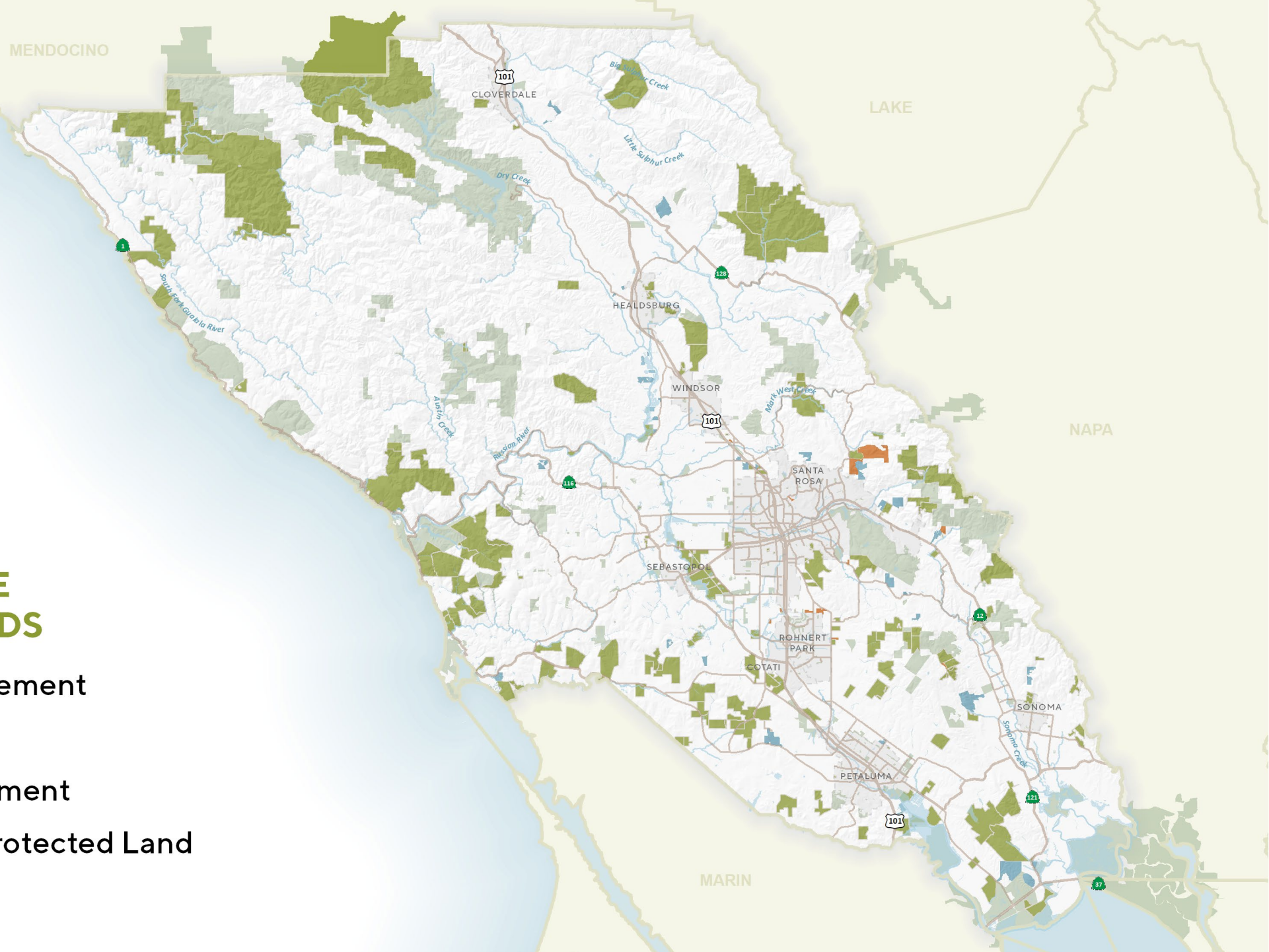
- Vital Lands Initiative Update
- Proactive Conservation
- Discussion
- Farmland for All
- Discussion

The background of the slide is a high-angle aerial photograph of a Sonoma County landscape. The scene shows a patchwork of green agricultural fields, some of which appear to be vineyards with distinct rows of vines. Interspersed among the fields are areas of dense, dark green forest. In the lower right, a river flows through the landscape, with a small bridge crossing it. The background is filled with rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky, with a light mist or fog hanging in the valleys.

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District permanently protects the diverse agricultural, natural resource, and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations.

AG + OPEN SPACE PROTECTED LANDS

- Conservation Easement
- Fee Title
- Open Space Easement
- Other Public or Protected Land



VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE | Goals



- 1** Protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive **agriculture**
- 2** Protect open lands that surround and differentiate the County's urban areas and contribute to the unique **scenic character** of the County
- 3** Protect open space and **publicly accessible lands** in and near cities and communities and **connect people** with protected lands
- 4** Protect natural lands and aquatic habitats that support sustainable **aquatic ecosystems and water resources**
- 5** Protect natural lands and terrestrial habitats that support **plants, wildlife, and biodiversity**

A CALL TO ACTION | 30% by 2030

Conserve 30% of **U.S. lands
and waters** by 2030

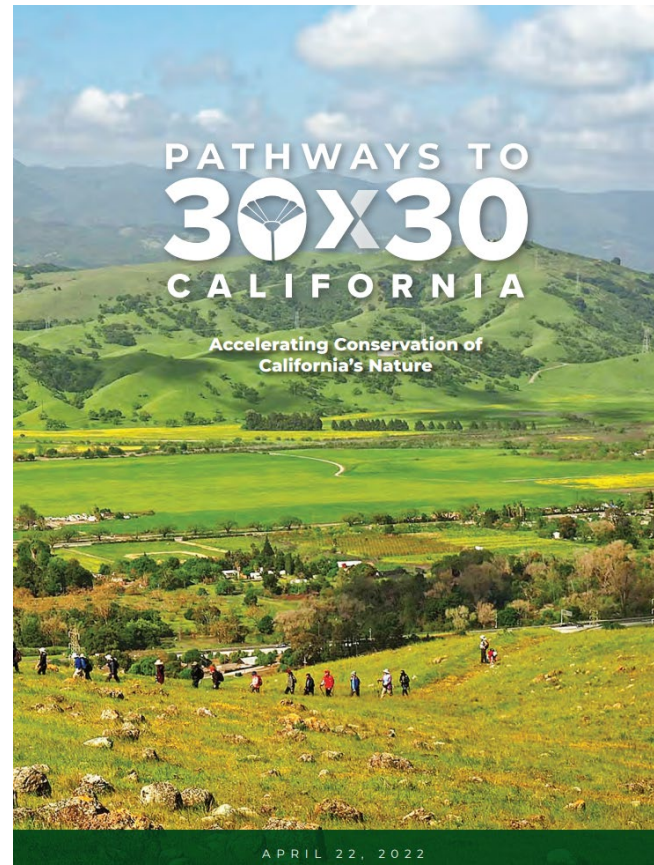


CONSERVING AND RESTORING AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

2021

*A preliminary report to the National Climate Task Force
recommending a ten-year, locally led campaign to conserve and
restore the lands and waters upon which we all depend, and
that bind us together as Americans.*

Conserve 30% of **CA lands and
coastal waters** by 2030



Objectives

- 1** Protect and restore **biodiversity**
- 2** Expand **access** to nature
- 3** Mitigate and build resilience to **climate change**

VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE | Accomplishments



- Conserved the 289-acre El Recreo property
- Added 2,860 acres of **publicly accessible parkland**
- Developed the **Climate Resilient Lands Strategy** with the County
- Developed acquisition **project evaluation criteria** based upon Vital Lands
- Enhanced acquisition program **capacity**
- Initiated all acquisition projects, resulting in a total of **58 active projects**



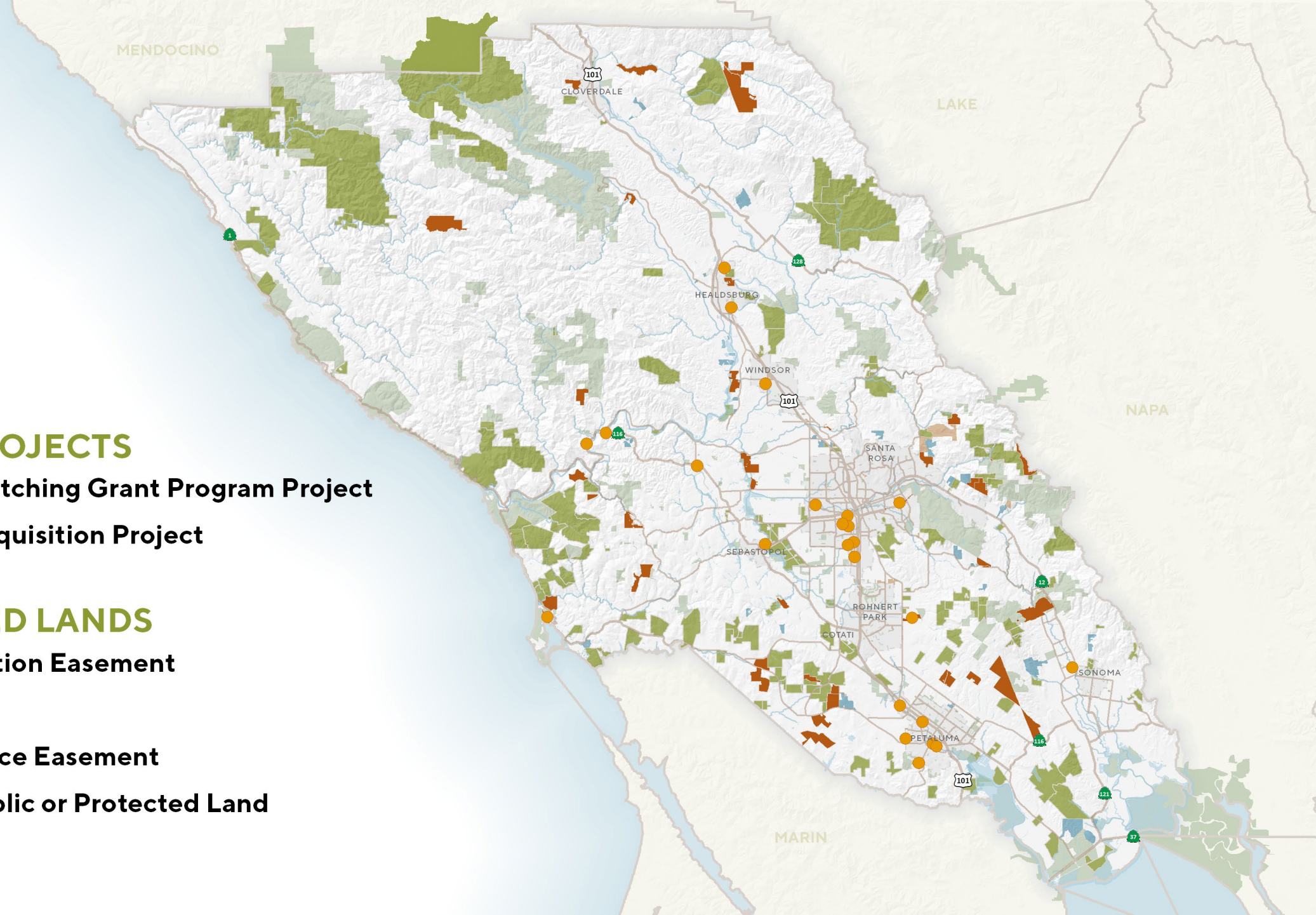
Carrington Coast Ranch
Regional Park & Open Space Preserve

ACTIVE PROJECTS

- Active Matching Grant Program Project
- Active Acquisition Project

PROTECTED LANDS

- Conservation Easement
- Fee Title
- Open Space Easement
- Other Public or Protected Land





Vital Lands Initiative

Proactive Conservation

Vital Lands Initiative

- *Increase **proactive measures** to protect land.*
- *Protect areas with multiple conservation features.*
- *Protect properties that increase connectivity between protected areas.*
- *Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaptation.*
- *Protect a variety of lands that ensure an equitable distribution of benefits to our diverse communities.*



Gloeckner Turner Ranch

PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Overview

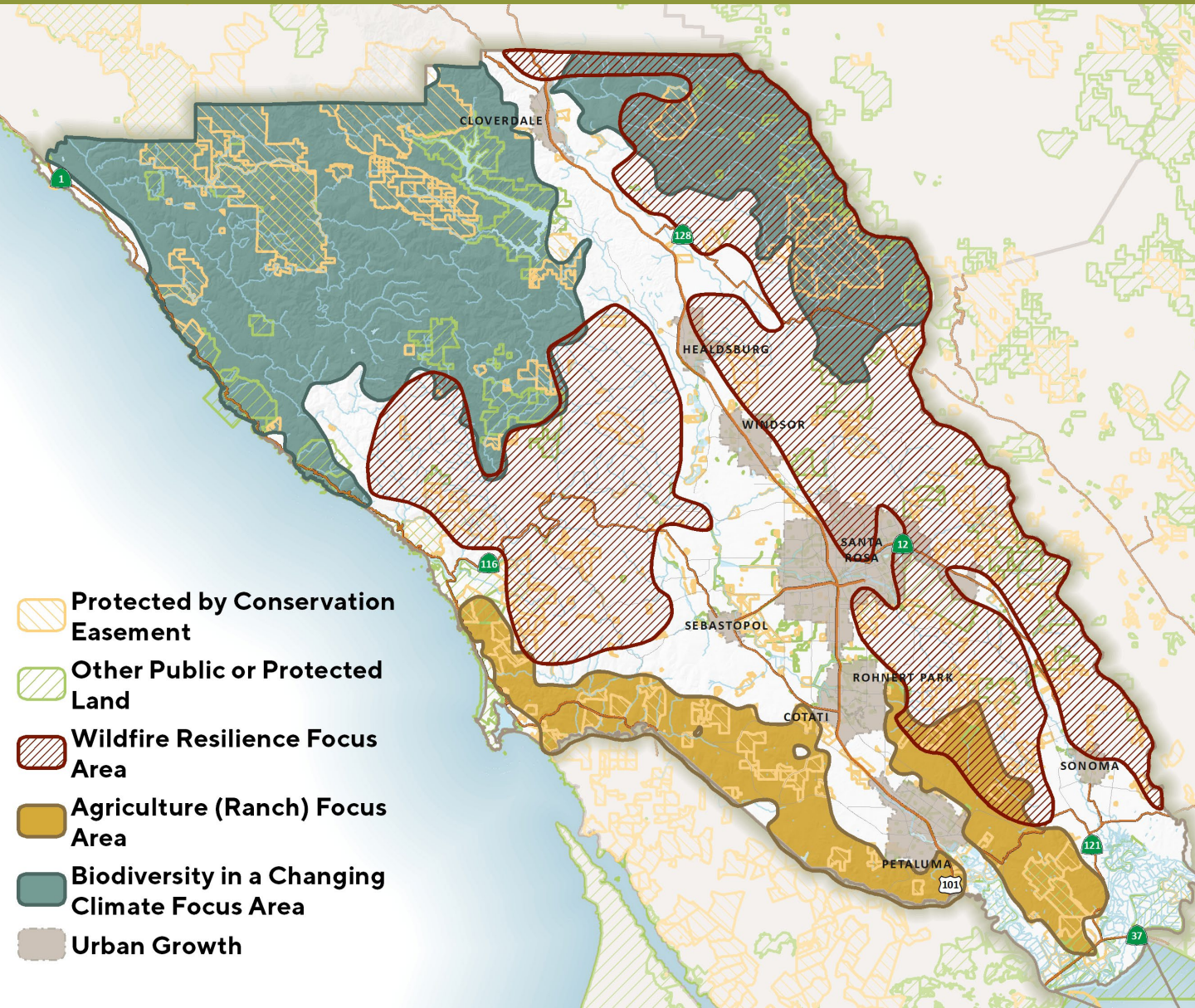
- **What have we done?**
Determined criteria and mapped each focus area
- **Purpose of today?**
Receive feedback and direction on focus areas for proactive conservation
- **What is next?**
Finalize implementation plan (2022), pilot (early 2023)



PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Focus Areas

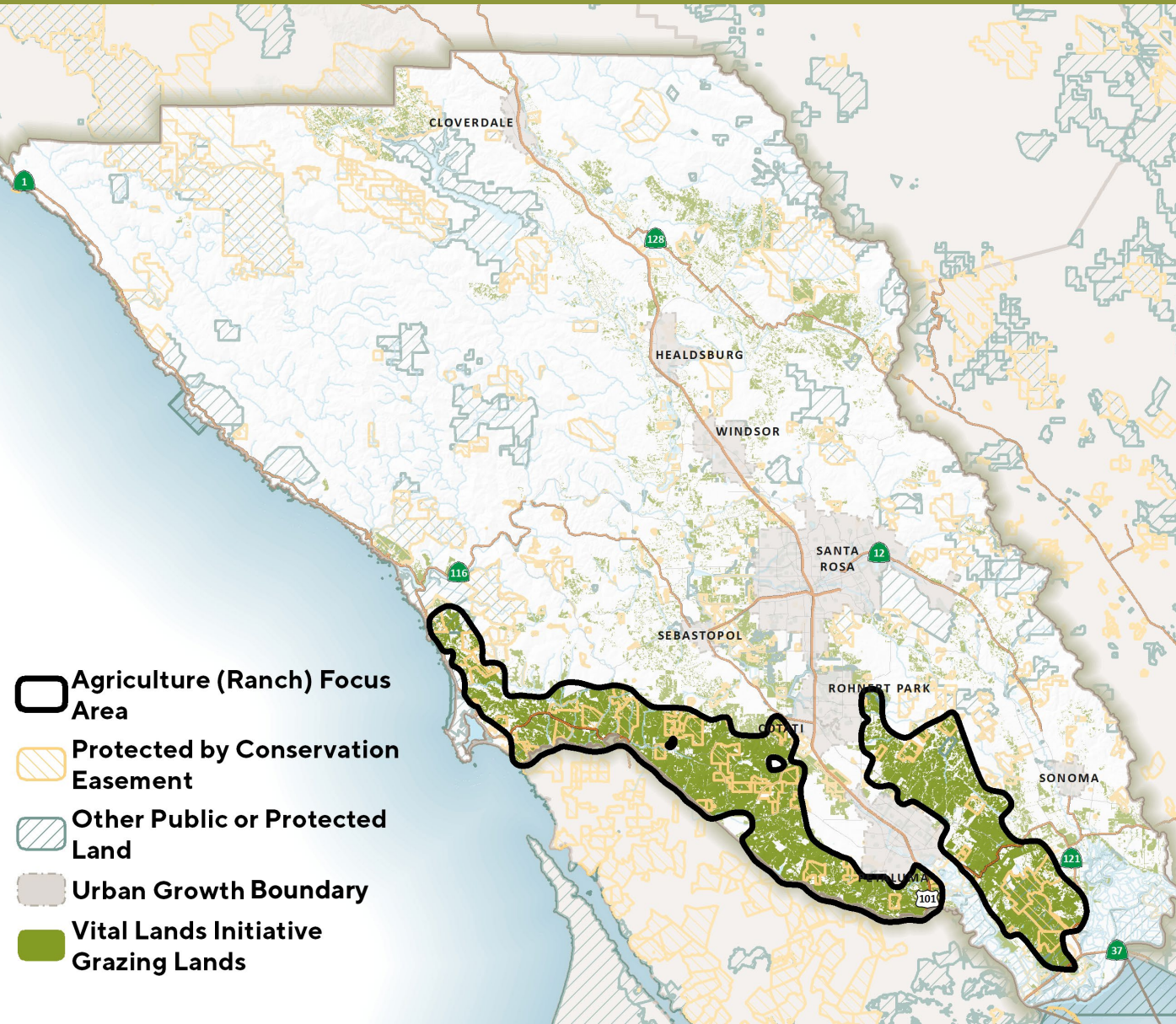
- Focus areas for proactive conservation:
 - Vibrant Agriculture: Farms* and Ranches
 - Biodiversity in a Changing Climate
 - Greenbelts + Wildfire Resilient Communities
 - Healthy Streams*
- Proactive outreach is a **strategy for land conservation in each of those focus areas**

* Not shown on map



PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Agriculture: Ranches

- Lands large enough to support a **diversity of agricultural uses**, with a focus on grazing
- **Defined by:**
 - Vital Lands Initiative Grazing Lands
 - Agricultural land connectivity
 - Property size
 - Developed surfaces



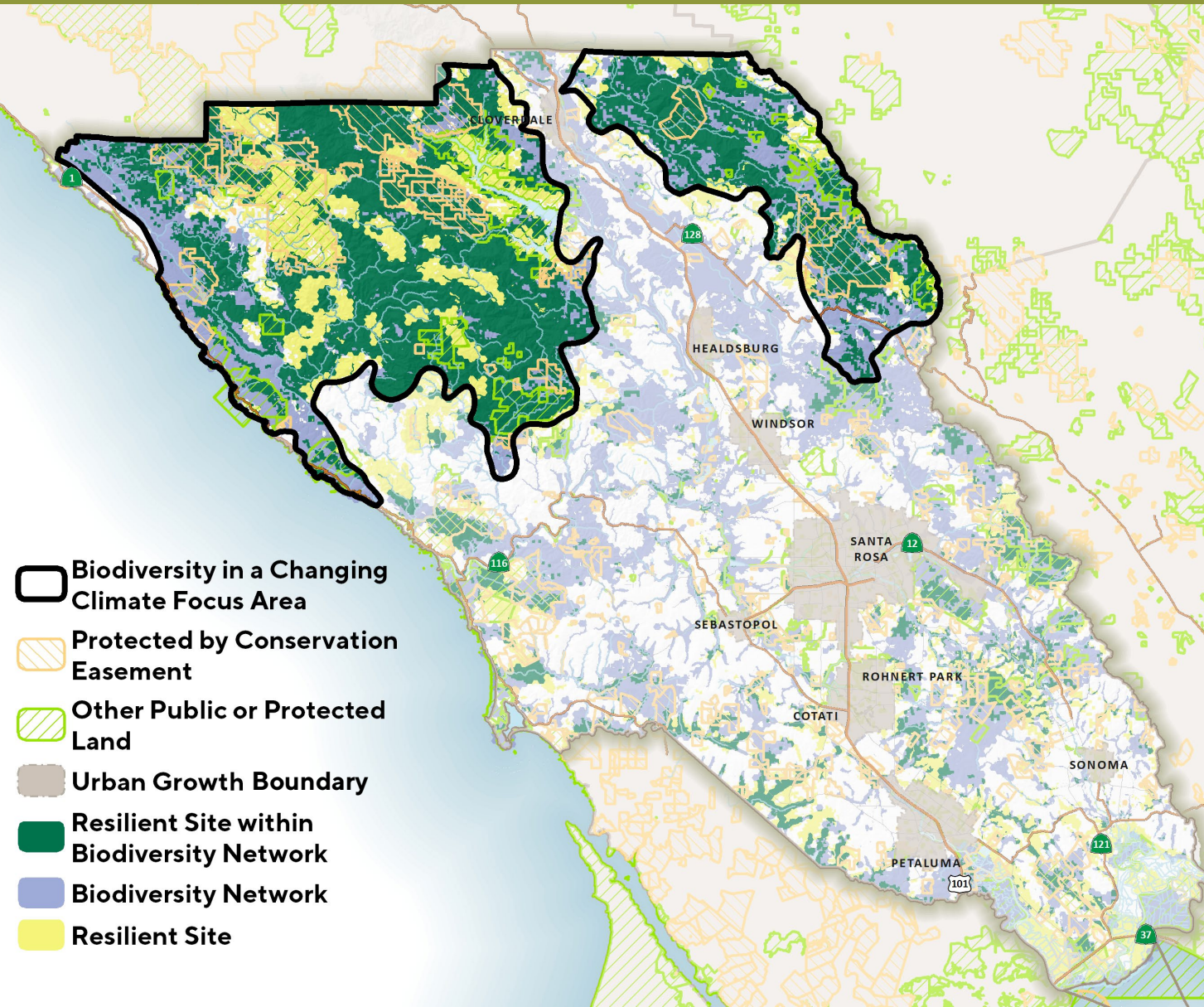
- Smaller **farms** close to communities
- **Defined by:**
 - Size
 - Proximity to communities
 - Topography
 - Water access
 - Housing and other infrastructure
 - Soils
 - Threat



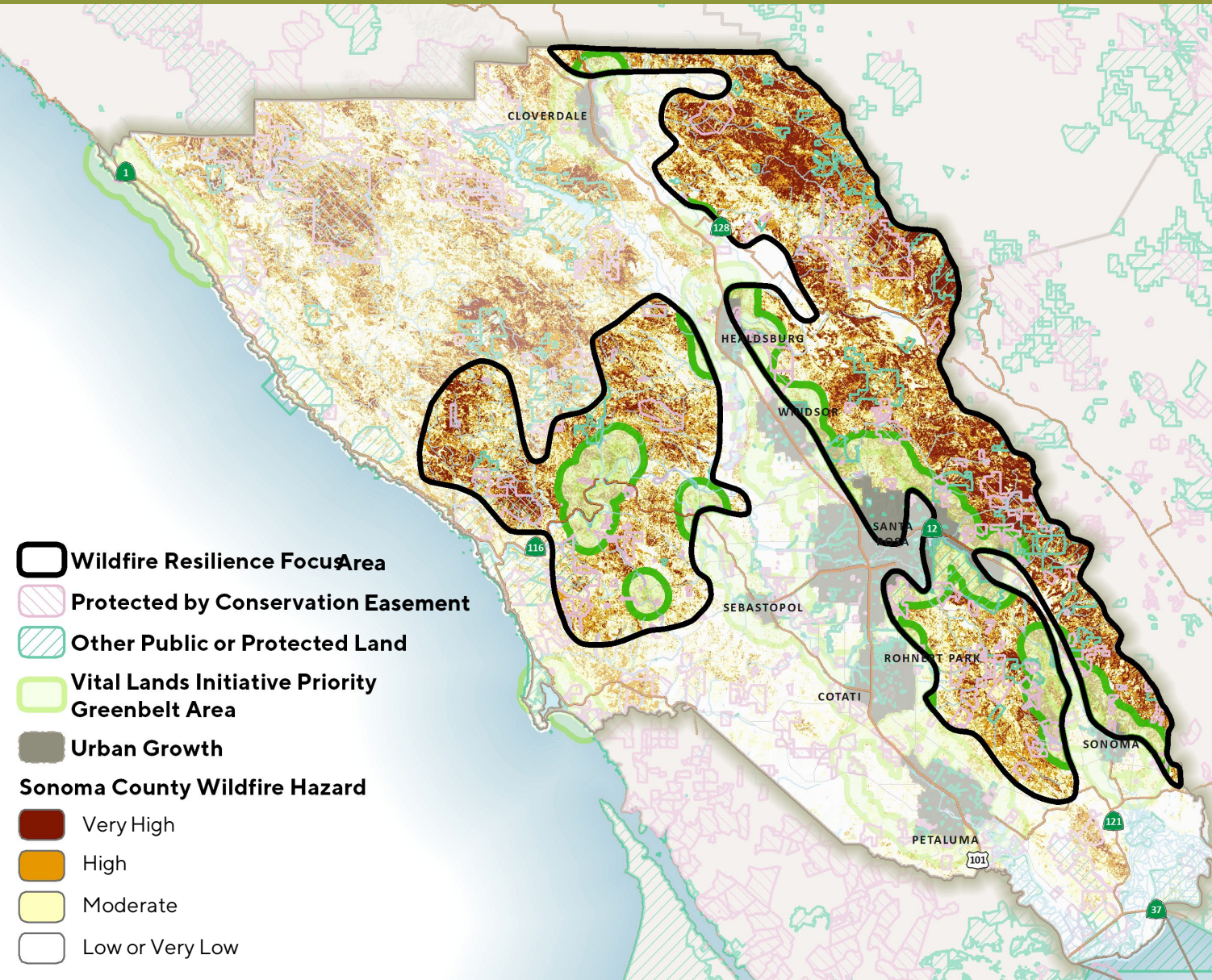
Guardino (La Reve Berry Farm)

PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Biodiversity in a Changing Climate

- Network of connected habitats that support **high biodiversity** and that are projected to be **resilient** in the face of climate change
- **Defined by:**
 - Landscape connectivity
 - Part of biodiversity network (based on rare plant communities)
 - Terrestrial climate resilience



- **Greenbelt properties** surrounding higher risk communities and **developable lands** within fire-prone areas
- **Defined by:**
 - Within Vital Lands Priority Greenbelt Area
 - High wildfire hazard
 - Within Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)
 - Subdivision potential (per zoning)



PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Healthy Streams

- Partnership with the CA Department of Conservation and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Acquire **easements over streamside areas** on agricultural lands and in forested headwater areas
- **Defined by:**
 - Presence of riparian-dependent threatened, endangered, or species of special concern
 - Quality of riparian habitat
 - Existing and potential carbon sequestration



Riverfront Regional Park

PROACTIVE CONSERVATION | Next Steps

- **Launch pilot outreach campaign in early 2023**
 - Develop outreach approach and materials
 - Evaluate partnership and funding opportunities
 - Develop performance metrics and reporting tools
 - Initiate 5 new projects within focus areas





Vital Lands Initiative

Proactive Conservation

Discussion



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Vital Lands Initiative

Farmland for All

Tierra Vegetables

Vital Lands Initiative

- Protect lands that support **diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture**.
- Create a **balanced portfolio** of protected lands that represents the diverse types of agriculture in Sonoma County.
- Support **access to land** for farmers and ranchers.
- Evaluate, test, and implement **new tools and policies** for effective and appropriate land conservation.



Burns (Open Field Farm)

FARMLAND FOR ALL | Program Goals



- **Prevent conversion** of agricultural land via conservation easements and affirmative agricultural covenants
- **Preserve agricultural conservation values** by supporting responsible stewardship of land via stable land tenure.
- **Increase access to agricultural land** by reducing the price of the land and proactively connecting producers to opportunities to purchase land.
- **Enhance equitable access** to agricultural land.
- **Support local food security** by ensuring land remains in productive agricultural use.

New and enhanced tools for ag land conservation

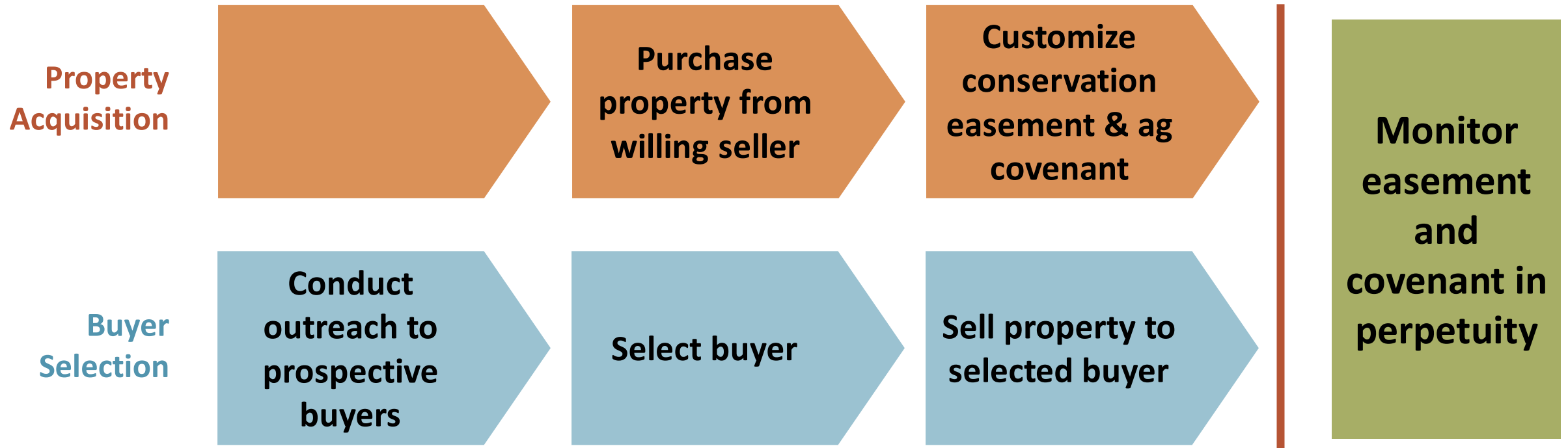
- Buy-Protect-Sell pilot program
 - Small farms project evaluation criteria
 - Affirmative ag covenant
 - Buyer selection criteria
- Conservation easement landowner outreach re: leasing to ag producers

Additional areas of focus

- Smaller agricultural properties
- Equitable land access



BUY-PROTECT-SELL PROCESS



BUY-PROTECT-SELL SMALL FARMS CRITERIA

- Small farm properties make unique contributions
 - Relatively more affordable land access
 - Diverse types of food production
 - Greenbelt and urban open space
- Some factors affect small farms differently than large ag properties
- Specific criteria allow us to recognize small farms' unique features so that they can be competitive in our assessment process



Bayer Farm

BUY-PROTECT-SELL SMALL FARMS CRITERIA



Land characteristics

- **Flat topography/minor hills**
- **Soils sufficient for agriculture**
- Not affected by future sea-level rise
- No special habitat likely to be damaged by ag activities
- Rarely or never floods

Size

- **2-20 acres production; <50 acres**

Location

- **Access to markets & services**
 - <40 minutes to large population center(s)

Infrastructure

- **Housing**
- **Irrigation water access and/or storage**
- Storage facilities
- Electricity
- Fencing
- Driveway/parking

Other factors

- Conversion risk to non-agricultural use
- Zoning: LIA, LEA, DA, RRD, or AR
- Ag production could provide community food security benefits
- Ag use of property could contribute to fire resilience

AFFIRMATIVE AG COVENANT | Overview

- Conservation easements = *ag use allowed*
- **Affirmative covenants = *ag use required***
- **Ensure continued ag use of property**
- When a small farm isn't farmed any more, benefits to community are lost
- Affirmative ag covenants protect those benefits forever
- Covenant design balances requirement to provide benefits with flexibility to respond to changing conditions



Guardino (La Reve Berry Farm)

AFFIRMATIVE AG COVENANT | Draft terms



Minimum ag use requirement

- **70-80% of property's ag area** must be in agricultural use at any given time
- Landowner will prepare an **Agricultural Use Plan** that describes the overall strategy
- The landowner will have **flexibility** to determine yearly activities, including rest periods

Other potential requirements

- 30-80% of property's ag area in **food production**
- Agricultural **education/outreach**
- **Measures to maintain affordability**
 - Requiring sale to qualified buyer
 - Restrictions on price increases

BUY-PROTECT-SELL | Buyer Application



Looking for: Long-term owner with potential to develop successful farm business whose vision for farm management and community benefits aligns with program goals

Selection criteria

- Qualifications & experience
- Vision
 - Suitable for the property
 - Potential for business success
 - Community benefits (education, food security, etc.)
- Readiness

Process

- Identify pool of qualified applicants
- Request proposals for specific properties
- Farm visit
- Interview

FARMLAND FOR ALL | Next steps

- Solicit feedback from community
- Finalize all components
- Develop outreach plan for program roll-out
- Pilot buy-protect-sell process in early 2023
 - Acquire 2 farms
- Develop approach for connecting conservation easement landowners and lessees



Sonoma Garden Park



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Tierra Vegetables