



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 1/26/2021

To: Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District
Department or Agency Name(s): Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District
Staff Name and Phone Number: Misti Arias, 565-7264
Vote Requirement: Majority
Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space Vital Lands Initiative

Recommended Action:

Approve resolution of the Board of Directors of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District adopting the Vital Lands Initiative as the long-term conservation plan for the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, and finding that this adoption is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act.

Executive Summary:

Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District's Vital Lands Initiative identifies goals, objectives, mapped priorities, strategies, and tools to guide the work of Ag + Open Space through 2031. The plan represents several years of robust community and partner engagement, expert input, and substantial data collection and analysis.

Discussion:

AG + OPEN SPACE BACKGROUND

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) was formed by the visionary voters of Sonoma County in 1990 and reauthorized in 2006 with over 76% voter approval. The mission of Ag + Open Space is to ***permanently protect the diverse agricultural, natural resource, and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations***. To date, Ag + Open Space has protected over 123,000 acres of agricultural, recreational, natural resource, and other open space lands, and will continue to care for these and future protected lands in perpetuity. Ag + Open Space has leveraged over \$173 million of local sales tax dollars with outside revenues.

LEGISLATION AND POLICY DIRECTION

The work of Ag + Open Space is directed by the Board of Directors, implementing the provisions of the voter-approved Measure F and accompanying expenditure plan. When the Board approved the 2014 Ag + Open Space Management Review, it directed Ag + Open Space to implement several key recommendations that have guided the Vital Lands Initiative planning process: a) the development of a comprehensive, integrated

plan that encompasses all Ag + Open Space activities - including fiscal and administrative, planning, acquisition, and stewardship; b) increased engagement and information sharing with the community; and c) regular performance reporting to demonstrate transparency and efficient use of tax-payer dollars.

To date, Ag + Open Space has been directed by numerous Board-adopted policy documents, including the 2006 Acquisition Plan - *Connecting Communities and the Land*, 2012 Fee Land Strategy, 2012 Work Plan, and 2009 Strategic plan. Since adoption of the 2006 Acquisition Plan, Ag + Open Space has led the development of foundational datasets through the Sonoma County Vegetation Mapping and LiDAR program, which provide detailed information about vegetation, land use, and hydrology in Sonoma County. In addition, Ag + Open Space received outside funding to develop new information related to climate change, extreme events including fires and floods, and economic benefits of land conservation, and has incorporated these new data into the Vital Lands Initiative to inform land conservation priorities, strategies, and actions.

VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

The Vital Lands Initiative is a long-range comprehensive plan to guide and prioritize land conservation activities (including planning, acquisition, and ongoing stewardship) of Ag + Open Space through 2031. Building upon a foundation of 30 years of land conservation success, the intended outcomes of the Vital Lands Initiative are to:

- Engage with our partners and the diverse communities within Sonoma County to identify land conservation challenges, priorities, and opportunities
- Bring several discrete policy documents and work plans into one comprehensive plan
- Update and refine the data and prioritization framework that guide future land acquisition and stewardship actions
- Enhance our communication with the public about Ag + Open Space land protection efforts and the positive impacts of this work for wildlife, water quality and supply, economic vitality, and human health and well-being

The Vital Lands Initiative includes the following information:

- Background and accomplishments of Ag + Open Space since 1990
- Universal Objectives and Guiding Principles to inform all future land conservation efforts
- Five goals and associated objectives focused on agricultural lands, community identity, healthy communities, water, and wildlife
- Criteria and processes for identifying conservation priorities
- Strategies and tools for implementing the vision through 2031
- Appendices documenting data, analyses and methods, as well as community outreach and engagement

PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Vital Lands Initiative reflects previous Board direction, state legislation and policies, several years of robust community engagement and input, substantial data collection and analysis, and expert input. The Vital Lands Initiative goals, objectives, mapped priorities, strategies, and tools will guide the work of Ag + Open Space

through 2031, when the current funding measure sunsets. Ag + Open Space held over 150 small and large meetings with participation by over 600 community members, tribal representatives, partners, technical advisors, local and state elected and agency officials, as well as individual meetings with Board, Advisory Committee and Fiscal Oversight Commission members. In addition to the community workshops hosted by Board members in each Supervisorial District, Ag + Open Space held four thematic workshops focused on water and wildlife, agriculture, greenbelts and community separators, and recreation. Community engagement included targeted outreach to Spanish speaking communities, organizations and media outlets, and all materials were translated into Spanish. Ag + Open Space formed an Agricultural Technical Advisory Team, and held ten meetings at the Sonoma County Farm Bureau's offices to receive input and guidance from the agricultural community. Significant new data sets were developed for the Vital Lands Initiative to map priority conservation areas, to evaluate conservation threats and trends, and to share information with the Board and the community. These datasets include countywide LiDAR and information related to vegetation, agricultural use, built infrastructure, wildlife habitat, streams, wetlands, hydrology, groundwater, wildlife corridors, community health, and economic vitality. Many of these datasets were developed in partnership with local entities such as Sonoma Water, with over \$3 million in funding from state and national partners such as NASA, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California State Coastal Conservancy, the Gordon and Betty Moore (Moore) Foundation, and S.D. Bechtel, Jr. (Bechtel) Foundation.

The plan will be available on the Ag + Open Space website, and will include a brief printable summary document as well as an interactive web map for more detailed exploration of land conservation priorities and data.

CLIMATE CHANGE & EXTREME EVENTS - INFORMING THE VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE

In addition to informing Ag + Open Space land conservation priorities, several of the datasets collected as part of the Vital Lands Initiative planning process are foundational to Ag + Open Space and the County for climate change and extreme event planning - including vegetation management and disaster planning related to floods and fires. Ag + Open Space has collected data and performed substantial analyses related to climate change, including carbon sequestration mapping in collaboration with NASA's Carbon Monitoring System Program and The Nature Conservancy, which provide the potential for Ag + Open Space to quantify aboveground carbon. In collaboration with the Regional Climate Protection Authority, Ag + Open Space evaluated different land conservation scenarios and their emissions and public health implications, and has engaged in stream corridor mapping in collaboration with the Coastal Conservancy and Bechtel Foundation. All of the above climate change datasets and analyses will be used in the implementation of the Vital Lands Initiative for identifying priority areas for protection, designing conservation easements, informing land management activities on Ag + Open Space-owned properties, and supporting stewardship of protected lands in perpetuity.

The fires of October 2017 occurred while the Vital Lands Initiative was being developed and - along with the entire County - Ag + Open Space pivoted to address this disaster. Ag + Open Space was directed by the Board

to convene Sonoma County groups focused on working and natural lands, and to facilitate the development of strategies for long term resiliency and recovery for Board consideration. Over 60 organizations came together to form the Watershed Collaborative, and developed *Living in a Fire Adapted Landscape: Priorities for Resiliency*. On January 23, 2018, the Board accepted this document and Ag + Open Space began to implement the relevant objectives from the document related to land stewardship, data collection and analysis, and priorities for land conservation. In addition to providing foundational information for the natural resources elements of the Office of Recovery and Resiliency Recovery Plan, these findings and recommendations related to extreme event resiliency have informed and refined the Vital Lands Initiative, as have the data collected since October 2017 related to fires, floods, and climate change. In addition, Ag + Open Space participated in cross-agency partnerships related to the 2019 Kincade Fire and 2020 Walbridge, Myers, and Glass Fires, including data collection, land management, and community outreach efforts. Relevant information from these collaborations has informed conservation priorities and strategies in the Vital Lands Initiatives and supports ongoing land management and partnership efforts by Ag + Open Space for the sustainment of healthy watersheds and communities in the face of climate change and extreme events.

SUMMARY OF CHANGES TO VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE FOLLOWING DECEMBER 17, 2019 BOARD WORKSHOP

On December 17, 2019, Ag + Open Space presented the draft Vital Lands Initiative to the Board of Directors and received Board input and direction for updating the document, based on the Board's review and receipt of public comment on the document. In addition, Ag + Open Space received 23 public comments and letters of support at that time. Since the December 2019 workshop, Ag + Open Space staff met with individual Board members and partners to receive additional input on the draft Vital Lands Initiative. Ag + Open Space also updated the Vital Lands Initiative in 2020 in consideration of recent global events and related strategic County initiatives. Ag + Open Space developed new strategies to support local agriculture at risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and amplified the agency's focus on equity, inclusion, and diversity both internally and in the community.

The following changes were made to the Vital Lands Initiative in response to Board and public input:

- Removed the Recommended Expenditures table to avoid confusion regarding multi-benefits of vast majority of Ag + Open Space acquisitions. Instead, funding recommendations for implementation will be made as part of the annual budgeting process.
- Added the following Guiding Principle:
 - "Work with a diversity of individuals, community groups, organizations, and Sonoma County Tribes to develop shared strategies for land conservation that are equitable and inclusive."
- Added the following Universal Objectives:
 - "Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaption, including projects that promote carbon sequestration and avoided emissions and enhance biodiversity."
 - "Protect a variety of lands that ensure an equitable distribution of benefits to diverse communities."

- Added the following objectives in the Agricultural Lands goal:
 - “Ensure that grazing is allowed for vegetation management and fire protection in projects under the Wildlands and Water Goals where it is consistent with the protection of Wildlands and Water conservation features.”
 - “Ensure that at least 50% of all future Ag + Open Space projects under the Community Identity Goal include agricultural use.”
- Added the following objective in the Healthy Communities Goal:
 - “Continue sustainable and climate friendly agriculture where appropriate on recreational lands.”
- Modified a Water objective to include headwater streams: “Protect the highest priority riparian corridors and headwater streams.”
- Added the following objective to the Wildlands Goal:
 - “Protect lands critical for supporting high native biodiversity.”
- Added a prioritization criterion within the “Implementing the Vision” section:
 - “Maintaining a balance in benefits received by the community through open space protection, including clean air and water, climate change and extreme event resiliency, public health, and local food security”
- Added a new strategy:
 - “Integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure our work is informed by, reflects the priorities of, and provides benefits to the diverse communities of Sonoma County.”
- Added a two-page spread about the Sonoma County General Plan, its history, and its relationship to Ag + Open Space
- Added a two-page spread about Ag + Open Space’s work to bring communities together
- Made refinements to “Achieving the Ag + Open Space Mission” section
- Made the following refinements to maps:
 - Added lands owned by Sonoma County Tribes to the Sonoma County Public + Protected Lands map (page 49)
 - Made corrections to public access designations in the Existing + Planned Public Access map (page 70)
 - Added the historic extent of San Pablo Baylands and an updated footprint of Tolay Lake to the Priority Wetlands map (page 78)
 - Added priority grassland areas to the Priority Grasslands, Shrublands, + Hardwoods map (page 83)
- Added references/sources and photo credits in Appendix C.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE

Upon Board adoption of the Vital Lands Initiative, Ag + Open Space staff will commence the implementation process as outlined in the Implementing the Vision section. This process will use the data and information

gathered and developed through the Vital Lands Initiative to refine land protection priorities. Ag + Open Space staff will present the Board with recommendations for proactive outreach and protection of the highest priority lands. In addition, the implementation process will identify performance measures to evaluate success. Performance reporting on all goals and objectives will be provided to the Board and the community on an ongoing basis via Ag + Open Space Board meetings, the Ag + Open Space website, social and traditional media, and community meetings.

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

The Vital Lands Initiative is exempt from CEQA because all of the projects to be completed under the Vital Lands Initiative are statutorily exempt, pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.28, which exempts from CEQA the acquisition, sale, or other transfer of interest in land by a public agency for the purposes of the preservation of the natural condition of the property including plant and animal habitats; restoration of natural conditions including plant and animal habitats; for continuing agricultural use of the land; prevention of encroachment of development into flood plains; preservation of historical resources; and preservation of open space or lands for park purposes. In the alternative, projects to be completed under Vital Lands Initiative are exempt from CEQA pursuant to State Guidelines Section 15317, which exempts from CEQA the acceptance of easements in order to maintain the open space character of an area, which is what is contemplated by the initiative. The project is also exempt pursuant to State Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3), the common sense exemption, which exempts from CEQA projects that do not have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment.

Prior Board Actions:

December 17, 2019 (Board Action #51): Provide Board input and staff direction on the draft Vital Lands Initiative document.

August 14, 2018 (Board Action #11): Authorize the General Manager to execute service agreements for environmental services, including Tukman Geospatial LLC (\$150,000) and Prunuske Chatham, Inc. (\$200,000) for technical services related to the Vital Lands Initiative.

June 11, 2018 (Board Action #4): Authorize the General Manager to execute a second amendment to the agreement with The Regents of the University of California, Santa Barbara to continue mapping and prioritization of riparian areas for conservation and evaluation of watershed issues related to the fires.

January 23, 2018 (Board Action #27): Receive *Living in a Fire Adapted Landscape*

March 7, 2017 (Board Action #24): Initiate Vital Lands Initiative community outreach and input process.

July 19, 2016 (Board Action Item #1): Authorize the General Manager to execute service agreements with Creating Thinking, Inc. dba The Idea Cooperative (\$125,000) and Rose Roberts dba Farm Stewards (\$180,000) for community outreach and technical services related to the Vital Lands Initiative

May 24, 2016 (Board Action #59): Authorize the General Manager to execute service agreement with Steve Zuieback dba Synectic for technical services related to the Vital Lands Initiative

February 2, 2016 (Board Resolution 16-0040): Adopt Initial Public Access, Operation and Maintenance Policy

August 19, 2014 (Board Action #36): Receive Ag + Open Space Management Review

November 20, 2012 (Board Action #33): Adopt Fee Lands Strategy

March 27, 2012 (Board Action #33): Adopt Work Plan (2012-215)

February 24, 2009 (Board Resolution 09-0161): Adopt Strategic Plan (2009-2013)

June 6, 2006 (Board Resolution 06-0523): Adopt Acquisition Plan (*Connecting Communities and the Land*)

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 20-21 Adopted	FY21-22 Projected	FY 22-23 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures			
Funding Sources			

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General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources			

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

Board adoption of the Vital Lands Initiative will provide Ag + Open Space direction for implementation plans. These plans will be developed and budgeted for during the regular District budget cycle.

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

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

No new staffing requests are anticipated for the Vital Lands Initiative.

Attachments:

1. Vital Lands Initiative report

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