



Legislation Text

File #: 2020-0676, **Version:** 1

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:

Agricultural Support and Protection Emergency Grant Program

Recommended Action:

Direct Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District staff to develop and implement an emergency matching grant program to ensure that local farmers and ranchers can continue productive use of Sonoma County's agricultural lands through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive Summary:

In response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the Sonoma County agricultural community, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag+ Open Space) proposes to offer a \$1 million Agricultural Support and Protection (ASAP) Emergency Matching Grant Program. The ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program will be targeted at protecting agricultural lands at-risk of land conversion to non-agricultural uses by supporting existing operations that are vulnerable to failure as a direct result of the pandemic.

Discussion:

COVID-19 has affected nearly all aspects of life in Sonoma County. Our local agricultural community has suffered direct economic impacts as a result. Disruptions in the food system, including the supply chain, processing and storage capacity are testing the operational limits of local farmers, ranchers, and producers.

In response to the Board's request that staff explore options to assist the Sonoma County agricultural community during this challenging time, Ag + Open Space staff propose that the Board 1) approve the creation of the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program and 2) allocate up to \$1 million toward the Program. If approved, the ASAP program will support farmers and ranchers who can demonstrate that, as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lands they farm or ranch may go fallow or be devoted to non-agricultural uses without the requested financial assistance. Funds awarded through the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program will go toward keeping agricultural lands productive to support continued access to locally grown food and fiber and keep farming and ranching viable in Sonoma County. Funds awarded through this program will be targeted to stabilize conditions created by the COVID-19 crisis that imperil local farms by offering direct aid to farmers or landowners who can show the assistance will keep their agricultural land in production.

Sonoma County farmers, ranchers, and producers whose agricultural operations have been acutely affected by the global pandemic are eligible to apply for funding. Applications from public agencies, nonprofits, and other agricultural associations that support local agriculture are also eligible but must demonstrate how funding would directly support continued agricultural operations. Applications that offer to protect agricultural lands through conservation easements and/or affirmative agricultural covenants will receive special consideration. Applicants will be asked to demonstrate how their agricultural operations have been negatively impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and must show how emergency funding from Ag + Open Space will keep their operations going for the duration of the grant period. The goal of the program is to support a broad range of stakeholders who can commit to keeping the County's diverse agricultural lands in production. Specific conditions for recommended grants will be developed by staff in response to the variables presented by the diverse applicant pool, but the grant agreements will generally require accountability measures to ensure Ag + Open Space's funds directly support stable and productive uses of local farmland for the duration of the grant period. In order to ensure Ag + Open Space's investment of public funds results in the continuance of Sonoma County's vibrant agricultural community, grant recipients will receive reimbursement payments for qualified expenses only if they demonstrate continued agricultural production.

Since the start of local shelter in place orders, Ag + Open Space staff have been in regular communication with local agricultural groups, including but not limited to the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, Community Alliance for Family Farmers, the Farmer's Guild, and F.E.E.D. Sonoma. The ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program will draw upon local expertise to understand the problems facing local farmers due to the pandemic. Following the Board's approval of this item, staff will move quickly to develop selection criteria and application requirements. Staff will consider the best available data on the impacts of COVID-19 on Sonoma County agriculture and will work with our partners in agriculture, including the Agricultural Advisory Team, to inform the program. Further, staff will conduct targeted outreach to Sonoma County farmers, ranchers, and producers notifying them of this emergency funding opportunity.

It is anticipated that participants in our local agricultural economy have needs that far outweigh the funding Ag + Open Space is able to provide through this emergency funding. Staff will prioritize applications that provide the greatest community benefit, as measured by comparison to the remainder of the applicant pool. Further, staff will continue to work with willing landowners to protect agricultural lands throughout Sonoma County, especially those most at risk for conversion to non-agricultural uses, as Ag + Open Space has done for nearly 30 years.

This item requests the Board to direct Ag + Open Space staff to initiate the implementation of a \$1 million ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program and to develop program materials, including application and evaluation criteria. The request for grant applications and the evaluation process will be accelerated due to the nature of this program. Recommendations for grant awards will be presented to your Board for approval as soon as possible.

Ag + Open Space Expenditure Plan

The ASAP Emergency Grant Program is consistent with Paragraphs 3 and 5 of the Ag + Open Space Expenditure Plan. Paragraph 3 authorizes expenditures to protect “agriculturally productive lands,” defined to include “working farms and ranches, and other lands used for the production of food, fiber and plant materials and the raising and maintaining of livestock and farm animals.” Paragraph 5 authorizes expenditures to undertake a potentially broad range of “other open space projects” through matching grants. Although the Matching Grant Program is usually applied to fund urban open space and recreation projects within and near incorporated or urbanized areas, staff propose a limited one-time expansion of the program to preserve agricultural land uses as “other open space projects” in this unique emergency circumstance.

Connecting Communities and the Land

The proposed ASAP Emergency Funding Program advances goals established by the planning document *Connecting Communities and the Land*, which includes the following goals objectives, and policies:

- Support the economic vitality of working farms to preserve the agricultural heritage and diversity of the county.
- Protect the diverse agricultural character and heritage of Sonoma County.
- Support the continued viability of farms and ranches.
- Provide incentives for farmers and ranchers to remain in agriculture.
- Facilitate the continued agricultural use of farms and ranches.

Vital Lands Initiative

Though not yet formally adopted, Ag + Open Space’s draft long-range plan, The Vital Lands Initiative, has a primary goal and associated objectives that also support the creation of this program, including the following:

- Protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture
- Support access to land for farmers and ranchers.
- Support agricultural use on Ag + Open Space protected lands.

Strategic Plan Alignment

- The ASAP Emergency Grant Program most closely aligns with the Strategic Priority to “Secure Our Safety Net.” Though not necessarily anticipated at the time these priorities were set, COVID-19 has shaken the foundation of our community and economy, including our valuable agricultural community.

Prior Board Actions:

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 19-20 Adopted	FY20-21 Projected	FY 21-22 Projected
Budgeted Expenses		1,000,000	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures		1,000,000	
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other		1,000,000	
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources		1,000,000	

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

This amount is appropriated in the proposed FY 20-21 budget for capital acquisition. It will not impact projects expected to close in FY 20-21 and will not come from the \$4 million dollars allocated to the Matching Grant Program.

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

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

Attachments:

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