



## Legislation Text

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**File #:** 2021-0090, **Version:** 1

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**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:** Jennifer Kuszmar, 565-7266  
**Vote Requirement:** Majority  
**Supervisory District(s):** Countywide

**Title:**

Agricultural Support and Protection Emergency Matching Grant Program Round 1 Funding Recommendations and Proposal for Round 2 Solicitation

**Recommended Action:**

Approve funding recommendations for Round 1 of the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program, authorize General Manager to execute Grant Agreements for Round 1 ASAP projects, and direct Ag + Open Space staff to initiate a second funding solicitation.

**Executive Summary:**

After seeing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our local farmers and ranchers, the Board of Directors directed Ag + Open Space to develop the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program. Ag + Open Space solicited grant applications from local farmers and ranchers with direct outreach materials, both printed and web-based and in both English and Spanish from September 29 through November 15 and through numerous partner organizations. Staff received thirteen applications with a total grant request of over \$730,000. Staff worked with a subcommittee to review each project's ability to meet the requisite criteria. Based upon that review, staff and subcommittee members recommend Board approval to provide full funding or partial funding for nine projects totaling \$177,148.

Staff requests Board approval to offer a second round of funding through the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program to address ongoing COVID-19-related challenges that our farmers and ranchers are experiencing. This second round would seek to keep local farming and ranching operations viable while also connecting Sonoma County residents experiencing food insecurity with locally-grown vegetables, dairy, meat, and other agricultural products. As with the first round of funding, staff will strive to make this program available throughout the County to a diverse set of stakeholders. Free technical assistance will be provided in both English and Spanish. Further, Ag + Open Space is working to develop policies related to environmental justice as well as diversity/equity/inclusion. These policies will be applied to future funding considerations for this and other Ag + Open Space programs.

**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. According to a report commissioned by Ag + Open Space, the estimated losses in total agricultural values through the end of 2020 ranges between 9.7 percent to 19.2 percent. (*Economic Impacts from COVID-19 on Agricultural Community*, by Dr. Eyler, Economic Forensics and Analytics, Inc.; August 2020) For 2020, this is a range of \$32,506,000 to \$63,923,000 in lost agricultural value. Disruptions in the food system, including the supply chain, processing and storage capacity are testing the operational limits of local farmers, ranchers, and producers. Further, the pandemic has left many in our community food insecure, putting increasing pressure on local organizations that provide food to those in need.

In response to the unprecedented challenges COVID-19 has created for the local agricultural community, Ag + Open Space developed the Agricultural Support and Protection (ASAP) Emergency Matching Grant Program. The Board authorized up to \$1 million for the program. The target of the initial ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program solicitation was to 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.

### **ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program Round 1 Funding Recommendations**

Ag + Open Space developed the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program and solicited applications in both English and Spanish from September 29 through November 15. Staff conducted a robust outreach campaign to promote the program using the Ag + Open Space e-newsletter, social media, print and digital advertising in local English and Spanish news outlets, and direct email to over 150 individuals and organizations. Staff received thirteen applications with a total grant request of over \$730,000. Staff reviewed these applications with input from a subcommittee comprised of members from the Ag + Open Space Advisory Committee and Fiscal Oversight Commission. Additional input was provided by staff from the Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation Districts, who are under contract to provide technical assistance for this program. Upon review, staff and subcommittee members are recommending funding or partial funding for nine projects totaling \$177,148. These recommendations are based on each project's ability to meet the requisite criteria. Two applications, totaling \$432,000 were deemed ineligible. One was ineligible because the applicant did not demonstrate a clear link between the funding requested and the impacts of COVID-19. Another was deemed ineligible as it was unclear that the proposed project was agricultural in nature nor was it clear how the public purposes of Ag + Open Space would be furthered with the requested funds. The remaining eleven applications with funding requests ranging from \$6,500 to \$53,000 were evaluated using the following criteria, in addition to demonstrating a clear hardship due to the impacts of COVID-19 on the operation:

1. Inputs that keep land in productive use, such as plants, seeds, and soil amendments necessary to continue operation.
2. Minor infrastructure improvements, such as irrigation repairs, that are crucial to keeping the operation

in productive use.

3. Support for pivoting business models to adapt to conditions created by the pandemic. Examples include additional storage, packaging materials, protective gear for staff and customers, advertising/marketing costs for direct to consumer sales, certifications, booth fees, etc.
4. Payments for mortgage or lease costs in order to stay on the land.
5. Programs that provide funding to farmers in need while also providing food to Sonoma County residents that are experiencing food insecurity.

A key component of the ASAP program is that eligible projects need to provide a clear public benefit in addition to preserving agricultural land uses. Funds are targeted to address short-term operational contingencies that will support survival of local farms. As a result, applications for major infrastructure development or upgrades (e.g. wells) - representing long-term capital investments - are not recommended for funding.

Funds awarded through this solicitation 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 provide aid to stabilize conditions created by the COVID-19 crisis that imperil local farms and assist in keeping their agricultural land in production. Details on funding recommendations are found in the on file documents.

Staff request the Board's authorization for the General Manager to execute the Matching Grant Agreements for the Round 1 ASAP projects that are less than \$50,000.

### **ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program Round 2 Proposal**

With the recommendations above, the program still has over \$800,000 remaining in the Board-allocated budget. Staff request Board approval to offer a second round of funding through the ASAP Emergency Matching Grant Program to address ongoing, COVID-19-related challenges that local farmers and ranchers are experiencing. A second round of funding would seek to award the remaining funding to bring the total program funding up to \$1 million. This second round would further the intention of the first round to seek to keep local farming and ranching operations viable while also connecting Sonoma County residents experiencing food insecurity with locally grown vegetables, dairy, meat, and other agricultural products. Applicants to ASAP Round 2 will have to demonstrate hardships related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in order to be eligible for grant funding. As with the first round of funding, efforts will be made to make this program available throughout the County to a diverse set of stakeholders. Free technical assistance will be provided in both English and Spanish. Further, Ag + Open Space is working to develop policies related to environmental justice as well as diversity/equity/inclusion. These policies will be applied to future funding

considerations for this and other Ag + Open Space programs.

If approved, a successful second round of ASAP funding could provide numerous community benefits including:

- Known purchases of the coming season's produce, offering farmers the requisite certainty to undertake immediate costs to keep land in production.
- Additional food supply for organizations distributing food to those experiencing food insecurity, which could result in more people served.
- Increase in products for distribution to critical food programs for Sonoma County school-aged children.
- Improved access to locally grown products to those experiencing food insecurity in Sonoma County.

Staff will return to the Board with defined grant award parameters and a standardized contract for Round 2 program funding, with the intention of securing a delegation of authority to issue awards consistent with those parameters without further delay.

### **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.

### **Vital Lands Initiative**

Ag + Open Space's long-range plan, The Vital Lands Initiative, has a primary goal and associated objectives that support 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:**

July 14, 2020 Agricultural Support and Protection Program

**FISCAL SUMMARY**

<b>Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 20-21 Adopted</b>	<b>FY 21-22 Projected</b>	<b>FY 22-23 Projected</b>
Budgeted Expenses	\$177,148		
Additional Appropriation Requested			
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	\$177,148		
<b>Funding Sources</b>			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other	\$177,148		
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
<b>Total Sources</b>	\$177,148		

**Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:**

Ag + Open Space has adequate appropriations in the FY 20-21 budget.

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

**Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):**

**Attachments:**

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

1. ASAP Application Summaries and Funding Recommendations
2. Table of ASAP Applications and Funding Recommendations

