



Legislation Text

File #: 2021-0647, **Version:** 1

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): County Administrator's Office, Permit Sonoma, Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District

Staff Name and Phone Number: Christel Querijero (565-7071), John Mack (565-1233), Misti Arias (565-7264)

Vote Requirement: 4/5th

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Support for Community Vegetation Management Projects

Recommended Action:

- A) Approve \$300,000 from PG&E settlement funds for Permit Sonoma to work with top-ranked community organizations to resolve California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) vegetation management project issues.
- B) Approve resolution authorizing adjustments to Permit Sonoma's adopted FY 2021-2022 budget in the amount of \$300,000 to fund two Extra-Help Senior Environmental Specialists to support vegetation management project CEQA issue resolution.
- C) Set aside \$3 million in funds from the next allocation of vegetation management community grants for these top-ranked community organization vegetation management projects when CEQA issues are resolved.

(4/5th Vote Required)

Executive Summary:

This item requests your Board to approve the use of \$300,000 from PG&E settlement funds for Permit Sonoma to assist community organizations with meeting State environmental requirements associated with vegetation management projects. These community organizations recently applied for the County's Vegetation Management grant program, but were not awarded funds in large part due to the need to resolve California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) issues. Staff also requests your Board to approve a budget resolution to adjust Permit Sonoma's FY 2021-2022 adopted budget to appropriate \$300,000 for two Extra-Help Senior Environmental to support CEQA issue resolution for these projects.

This item further requests that the Board set aside up to \$3 million from the next allocation of community grants for vegetation management when CEQA issues are resolved.

Discussion:

On March 23, 2021, the Board approved up to \$4 million from PG&E settlement funds allocated for vegetation management to support a County grant program to fund community organizations' vegetation management projects. The Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) was tasked with developing and implementing the grant program, which followed the following timeline:

- April 23, 2021 - Grant solicitation opened
- April 28, 2021 - Grant workshop to answer potential proposer questions with Spanish translation available
- May 16, 2021 - Applications submitted
- May 28, 2021 - Awardee notification

A committee comprised of representatives from the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, County Administrator's Office, Permit Sonoma, Sonoma Water, University of California Cooperative Extension, Regional Parks, and CAL FIRE reviewed 89 applications with estimated project costs over \$16 million. Because the County remains the "lead agency" responsible for compliance with CEQA for projects under this grant program, the determination of what CEQA document would be required (e.g., categorical exemption, statutory exemption, negative declaration, mitigated negative declaration, or an environmental impact report), was an important review criterion for selection.

The committee awarded \$3,725,494 towards 20 projects throughout the County. Based on the project scope outlined in the application, these projects were determined to be eligible for categorical exemptions. However, at least seven projects, which would have been otherwise eligible for funding, did not receive funding due primarily to the need for additional CEQA analysis and review. A list of the seven projects with a brief description of the proposal is included as Attachment A.

Through a preliminary review, staff has determined that these and other future projects like them could likely fall under the CEQA coverage from the CAL FIRE Vegetation Treatment Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) procedures (CalVTP). While these procedures are substantially streamlined, developing the required documentation under the CalVTP procedures is still a substantial lift in terms of expertise needed, capacity to complete any necessary field reviews, preparation of required documentation, project monitoring during implementation, and mitigation if required. Staff will work with the community organizations through the CalVTP procedures, but could also provide other CEQA compliance assistance to additional community organizations.

Staff recommend using the approximate difference between the maximum grant awards approved (\$4 million) and total grant funds awarded (\$3.7 million), or \$300,000, to provide staff capacity at Permit Sonoma. Funds would be used to hire up to two additional Extra Help Environmental Specialists with expertise in CEQA, forestry, fire ecology and vegetation management to complete the required CEQA review for the identified projects. Position costs including benefits for Extra Help Senior Environmental Specialist and Extra Help Environmental Specialist are \$47.79 per hour and \$44.11 per hour, respectively. \$300,000 is requested from the first year of PG&E funding for vegetation management. A budget resolution to appropriate funds in Permit Sonoma's budget is included as Attachment B.

The increased program capacity would also support what is expected to be long-term efforts by the County to implement vegetation management and other fire resiliency efforts. This work closely aligns with the large-scale pilot projects for structural hardening, defensible space and vegetation management currently managed by Permit Sonoma and funded through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. Additional staff resources would work with community organizations on CEQA issues to position them for future grant funding through the County or other funding sources (e.g. CAL FIRE). Staff will monitor and track resources expended to help make community organizations' vegetation management projects CEQA-ready, and may make a future recommendation to the Board to fund CEQA support beyond one

year.

Permit Sonoma specialists will aim to work through the CEQA issues over the coming months. Staff recommend that the Board approve setting aside \$3 million from the next allocation of vegetation management community grants for these top-ranked community organization projects once CEQA issues are resolved. Staff will continue to work with the organizations to identify other potential sources of state or local funding, but believe these top-ranked projects meet the criteria established for the vegetation management grant program and would be shovel ready under a new solicitation.

Prior Board Actions:

3/23/2021 - Board approved up to \$4 million for community grants for vegetation management projects.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 21-22 Adopted	FY22-23 Projected	FY 23-24 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			
Additional Appropriation Requested	\$300,000		
Total Expenditures	\$300,000		
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other: 2017 Wildfires PGE Settlement	\$300,000		
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources	\$300,000		

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The Board of Supervisors allocated \$25 million from the PG&E settlement toward vegetation management on October 6, 2020. On March 23, 2021, the Board approved up to \$4 million from PG&E settlement funds for community organization vegetation management grants. \$3,725,494 in grants were awarded. If the request for Permit Sonoma staff is approved and funds are set aside for the seven projects needing CEQA resolution, the remaining balance from the vegetation management allocation would be \$16,814,506.

PG&E Vegetation Management Allocation	\$25,000,000
Community Grants Awarded (up to \$4M)	\$3,725,494
Santa Rosa Junior College	\$500,000
Vegetation Management Coordinator (3 years)	\$660,000
<i>Permit Sonoma Staffing for CEQA Support (pending approval)</i>	<i>\$300,000</i>
<i>Set-aside for community projects once CEQA issues resolved (pending approval)</i>	<i>\$3,000,000</i>
Balance Remaining	\$16,814,494

Staffing Impacts:			
Position Title (Payroll Classification)	Monthly Salary Range (A-I Step)	Additions (Number)	Deletions (Number)
Extra Help Senior Environmental Specialist	\$39.31 - \$47.79	1	
Extra Help Environmental Specialist	\$36.29 - \$44.11	1	

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

The rates including benefits for Senior Environmental Specialist and an Environmental Specialist are shown in the table above. \$300,000 is requested from the first year of PG&E funding for vegetation management.

Attachments:

Attachment A -Vegetation Management Grant Program Proposals needing CEQA Issues

Attachment B - Budget Resolution

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

None.