



Legislation Text

File #: 2021-1111, **Version:** 1

To: Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District

Staff Name and Phone Number: Kim Batchelder, 565-7355

Vote Requirement: Informational Only

Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

PG&E Settlement Funded Vegetation Management Grant Program Update

Recommended Action:

Informational Only

Executive Summary:

Since March 23, 2021, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) has administered a county-wide vegetation management grant program on behalf of the County, funded exclusively by PG&E settlement funds. On May 28, 2021, a multi-agency selection committee approved 20 community-oriented vegetation management projects that were well-designed, environmentally compliant, and showed the most potential to address immediate fire risk and improve our county's ability to become more fire resilient. On July 13, 2021, the Board of Supervisors approved a second phase of grant funding to include seven "conditionally approved" highly ranked project applicants and to solicit another round of grant applications by January 2022. A full-time Vegetation Management Coordinator has now been hired to lead these efforts on behalf of the County, and staff propose the next steps towards becoming a more fire and drought resilient county by improving the health of our natural landscapes and protecting our most vulnerable communities by using the PG&E settlement funds and leveraging new sources of state and federal funding.

Discussion:

On April 23, 2021, an invitation for grant applications was released by the County to communities, organizations and agencies to submit proposals to address fire risk and vegetation management priorities ready for implementation. On May 5, 2021, the County hosted a virtual workshop to assist grant applicants in understanding the process and the criteria to be used by the selection committee for choosing the best proposals. The selection committee consisted of representatives from Ag + Open Space, the County Administrator's Office, Permit Sonoma, Sonoma Water, University of California Cooperative Extension, Regional Parks, and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) in order to review 89 applications with estimated project costs over \$16 million.

On behalf of the County, Ag + Open Space is now managing 19 grant agreements totaling \$3,648,493 throughout the county. Based on the project scope outlined in the application, these projects were determined to have met California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance. These projects were primarily for vegetation removal along critical emergency access and escape routes and also included educational outreach, defensible space management, resilient landscaping, prescribed fire, and grazing

programs to reduce fuels.

The full-time Vegetation Management Coordinator hired by Ag + Open Space has followed up with the grantees to monitor the progress and use of funds, and to facilitate collaboration. This position is funded entirely by the County and does not rely on Ag + Open Space Measure F funds. On July 13, 2021, the Board of Supervisors approved an additional \$3 million in grant funding for additional projects in western Sonoma County that will be part of a California Vegetation Treatment Program (Cal VTP) application. Permit Sonoma staff, supported by previous Board funding, will assist these projects with CEQA compliance. Ag + Open Space staff facilitated an initial virtual workshop specific to these projects on July 28, 2021, to begin the dialogue with each of these communities and explain how the Cal VTP and project design process will be implemented. On August 8, 2021 Supervisor Hopkins and Ag + Open Space staff conducted the first site visit to three of the seven community projects with CALFIRE, Permit Sonoma, and community members to discuss the geographic scope of each project and highlight the most strategic ways to address fire threats to their communities. Ag + Open Space staff are scheduling the next field visit for the end of October for the remaining four community projects.

Subject to Board direction, Ag + Open Space's next step, in collaboration with its partners, will be to solicit another round of grant applications for community-driven, high priority vegetation management projects in January 2022. Ag + Open Space will host a technical workshop to receive feedback on the latest datasets and input from fire professionals and resource management experts to establish clear selection criteria and characteristics in order to select the projects that have the highest likelihood for success. Next, Ag + Open Space, Permit Sonoma, and CALFIRE, will host one or more public workshops to provide an overview of the grant program, describe the selection criteria, and educate potential applicants on specific lessons learned from the environmental compliance process from the initial round of proposals. Ideally, the selection committee will complete their review and Ag + Open Space could finalize the grant agreements by the end of March 2022 so that grantees would have ample time to complete their most urgent work prior to the beginning of the 2022 fire season.

Currently, the Vegetation Management Coordinator is following up and monitoring the first grantees to ensure that each project is advancing and the projects are accomplishing their proposed objectives. There has been significant work done to date. For example, the Cavedale Road-Trinity Road corridor project has been fully implemented by the Mayacamas Fire Safe Council and Mayacamas Volunteer Fire Department, which includes the treatment of 10.3 miles of roadside vegetation regrowth in areas burned by the Nuns Fire in 2017. The Resilient Landscapes Coalition drew over 100 participants to their first grant-funded virtual workshop to highlight the importance of landowners taking a proactive role in managing their defensible space so that it still supports wildlife habitat and yet keeps their property and neighborhood fire-safe. A site visit to Jenner Headlands highlighted continued work on a shaded fuel break along a prominent ridge above the towns of Jenner and Cazadero.

Valuable lessons have been learned in the grant program as well. Gualala Ranch Homeowners Association could not reach an agreement on liability and grant performance criteria as outlined in the grant agreement and opted to return the funds back to the County. Sonoma Resource Conservation District (RCD) has modified its scope of work to utilize landowner equipment and shift funds to complete fire break vegetation removal along a critical ridgeline. The RCD received only two bids from qualified vegetation management companies due to the high demand for these types of services. In addition, it is noteworthy that four projects requested

funding for chippers and a masticator - critical equipment for fuel load reduction - yet none of these projects have received their equipment due to manufacturing delays and high demand in Northern California.

Four projects focused on roadside fuel reduction along critical emergency routes are proceeding. Future collaborative efforts between the Vegetation Management Grant Program and Sonoma County Transportation and Public Works (TPW) are being pursued. The Board allocated \$2.5 million vegetation removal projects for TPW. Ag + Open Space staff will work with TPW to identify key focal areas where high priority vegetation removal projects along critical roads can reduce fire risk and improve public safety throughout the county.

Upon completion of the second round of grants, Ag + Open Space staff propose to host a technical workshop to evaluate the success of the vegetation management program and help guide it to take on a wide range of climate adaptation efforts building on the County Natural Systems Adaptation Plan, which is due to be completed at that time. This workshop will aim to engage our non-profit organizations and other county agencies to provide greater clarity on roles and responsibilities, and improve communications and collaboration to address climate change and fire resiliency. This workshop will be one of many efforts that Ag + Open Space will undertake to help leverage the remainder of the PG&E funds, coordinate public outreach, and continue to support vegetation management into the future.

In addition to gathering input on the highest priority projects and needs, Ag + Open Space staff are working to identify additional funding opportunities to further local vegetation management efforts. Currently, there are a number of state and federal funding opportunities. PG&E settlement funds could serve as an important match in order to leverage these funds. In FY 21/22 and FY 22/23, the state has allocated \$1.514 billion to support forest health, fire prevention, resilient forests and landscapes, and community-hardening efforts statewide. Ag + Open Space will work with the CAO's office to identify the mechanisms and agencies that will be responsible for applying for and allocating grant funds received. These funding sources will be helpful for short term needs to intensify vegetation management efforts, but local experts and partners are also working to identify longer term, comprehensive funding options such as a local wildfire hazard tax measure that will provide sustainable funding to ensure these efforts truly make a difference under the crisis conditions the county is facing.

Prior Board Actions:

October 6, 2020: Summary Number 25 Allocation of \$25 million from the PG&E settlement for vegetation management.

December 15, 2020: Summary Number 53A Received County and community feedback on vegetation management priorities; allocated \$70,000 for CLEE groups and \$1.6 million for expansion of fuel mapper decision support tool and outreach to parcel-scale decision support tool countywide.

March 23, 2021: Summary Number 19 Approved up to \$4 million for community grants for vegetation management projects and \$660,000 allocated to Ag + Open Space hire Vegetation Management Coordinator.

July 13, 2021: Summary Number 4 Approved \$300,000 to Permit Sonoma for Extra Help to lead Cal VTP and up to \$3M to support seven vegetation management projects and funding for additional projects.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 21-22 Adopted	FY 22-23 Projected	FY 23-24 Projected
Budgeted Expenses			

Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures			
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other			
Use of Fund Balance			
Contingencies			
Total Sources			

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

None

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

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

None

Attachments:

N/A

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

N/A