



Legislation Text

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To: Board of Directors of 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: Informational Only
Supervisory District(s): Countywide

Title:

Vital Lands Initiative Implementation Update: Increasing the Scale, Pace, and Equity of Land Conservation in Sonoma County

Recommended Action:

Receive a Vital Lands Initiative implementation update; provide input on focus areas to accelerate land conservation efforts in support of local, state, and federal goals; and provide input on the Farmland for All Program.

Executive Summary:

In January 2021, the Board of Directors for the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) approved the Vital Lands Initiative, a long-range comprehensive plan that identified the goals, objectives, mapped priorities, strategies, and tools to guide the work of Ag + Open Space through 2031. Since adoption of the Vital Lands Initiative, the state and federal government have committed to conserving 30% of our lands and waters by 2030 to help ensure resilience to climate change. Sonoma County is well positioned to substantially contribute towards meeting these goals, but it will require significantly increased and innovative land conservation efforts. Therefore, in addition to continued and ongoing work to acquire and steward conservation easements, Ag + Open Space staff have made substantial progress on several strategies outlined in the Vital Lands Initiative that will accelerate and enhance our ability to conserve land and meet our goals.

One of these strategies is the proactive conservation of high priority lands (focus areas). These focus areas for proactive conservation include lands important for maintaining biodiversity in a changing climate, preserving greenbelts and reducing wildfire risk, safeguarding agricultural lands, and protecting critical aquatic habitats and species. Staff have also developed a *Farmland for All* program to conserve agricultural properties, while also aiming to support a diverse range of agricultural production and cultivate a diversity of producers, resulting in a stronger and more inclusive agricultural industry and increased food security for our community.

The workshop is intended to receive the Board's input on these implementation strategies.

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.

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 stated goals of the Vital Lands Initiative are:

- Protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture.
- Protect open lands that surround and differentiate the County's urban areas and contribute to the unique scenic character of the County.
- Protect open space and publicly accessible lands in and near cities and communities and connect people with protected lands.
- Protect natural lands and aquatic habitats that support sustainable aquatic ecosystems and water resources.
- Protect natural lands and terrestrial habitats that support plants, wildlife, and biodiversity.

In addition to objectives associated with each of the above goals, the Vital Lands Initiative includes these universal objectives:

- Protect areas with multiple conservation features.
- Protect properties that increase connectivity between protected areas.
- Protect areas most threatened with development or conversion.
- Protect areas important for climate change and extreme event resiliency and adaptation, including projects that promote carbon sequestration and avoided emissions and enhance biodiversity.
- Protect areas that achieve the open space goals outlined in the Sonoma County General Plan.
- Protect a variety of lands that ensure an equitable distribution of benefits to our diverse communities.

The Vital Lands Initiative also calls upon Ag + Open Space to be strategic and innovative to maximize its ability to meet its goals and objectives. Below are the strategies and tools that provide direction specific to the efforts being discussed in this workshop.

- Expand and Improve Protections
 - Increase proactive measures to protect land.
 - Use innovative tools including affirmative easement provisions, auctions, and payments over time.
- Increase Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Impact
 - Transfer or sell all Ag + Open Space-owned properties.
 - Regularly evaluate and refine policies, protocols, and templates, and adopt new tools and technologies to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.
 - Integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Connect agricultural producers with available land.
- Ensure Scientifically Sound Decisions
 - Continually confirm that decisions are based in the best available science and data, including biophysical and social sciences.

- Integrate climate change and extreme-event resiliency.

VITAL LANDS INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Leaders at the state and federal levels have expressed a renewed interest in supporting land conservation as a key component in climate change adaptation and mitigation. With the Biden-Harris Administration's *America the Beautiful Initiative* and Governor Newsom's 30x30 Executive Order, we have direction at the national and state level to conserve 30% of our lands and waters by 2030, with an emphasis on protecting and restoring biodiversity, expanding access to nature, and building resilience to climate change. With the Vital Lands Initiative as its roadmap, Ag + Open Space is poised to further land conservation goals to ensure resiliency to climate change and extreme events, maintain and enhance biodiversity, and sustain healthy communities with clean water, air, and equitable access to open space and healthy local food. With these goals in mind, staff have completed the following tasks since the Board's adoption of the Vital Lands Initiative in January 2021:

- Conserved the 289-acre wild and scenic El Recreo property near Hood Mountain Regional Park for natural resource protection, scenic viewshed preservation, and wildfire resiliency.
- Acquired fee title to Paulin Meadow (Parcel J) to double the size of Paulin Creek Open Space Preserve (Santa Rosa; 19 total acres).
- Added 2,860 acres of publicly accessible parkland by transferring Carrington Coast Ranch (Sonoma Coast; 333 acres), Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve (Glen Ellen; 1,291 acres), and Wright Hill Ranch (Sonoma Coast; 1,236 acres) to Sonoma County Regional Parks, along with committing nearly \$3.4 million in funds for initial public access, operations, and maintenance.
- Partnered with the County to develop the Climate Resilient Lands Strategy.
- Developed acquisition project evaluation criteria based upon the Vital Lands Initiative.
- Initiated all acquisition projects, resulting in a total of 33 active conservation easement projects in addition to 25 active Matching Grant Program projects.
- Enhanced capacity of the acquisition program and streamlined acquisition processes by:
 - Doubling the number of Acquisition Specialists.
 - Hiring two acquisition consultants to expedite closings of current active projects.
 - Contracting with external counsel to review and update our conservation easement templates to ensure they reflect current industry standards and practices.
 - Increasing the number of qualified appraisers and creating as-needed contracts with a specialized pool.

Staff continue to focus on the core tenets of our work - conserving land through the acquisition and stewardship of conservation easements - while also making progress on several key initiatives intended to enhance and accelerate our land conservation efforts, including proactive conservation of high priority areas and a new *Farmland for All* program.

PROACTIVE CONSERVATION

Ag + Open Space is fortunate to be currently working with many landowners to conserve a wide variety of high priority lands. We are committed to these projects and are working diligently to complete them. Even so, we need to act with intention to ensure we can maintain a high level of land conservation activity in the years to come so that we can best meet local, state, and federal goals by 2030. Ag + Open Space is prepared to

implement a strategy that will allow the agency to be more proactive in seeking priority land conservation projects. Using the best available science, data, and mapping technologies, staff have honed in on lands that are critical for meeting 30x30 goals for biodiversity and climate adaptation, in addition to local goals for food security and extreme-event resiliency. Focus areas include lands important for maintaining biodiversity in a changing climate, preserving greenbelts and reducing wildfire risk, safeguarding agricultural lands, and protecting critical aquatic habitats and species.

Conserving these lands will:

- Ensure plants and animals have the space and resources they need to adapt and shift in the face of climate change.
- Reduce risk to our communities, while providing scenic vistas, recreational opportunities, and local food production.
- Help agricultural lands remain viable for production and ensure that the rural and scenic character of our region is preserved.
- Enhance drought tolerance and reduce impacts from frequent flooding, while also keeping our water clean and supporting habitat for fish and wildlife.

Ag + Open Space will be using the identified focus areas to proactively reach out to landowners within these specific regions to assess whether they would be interested in working with the agency to conserve their land to provide these important community benefits. This proactive outreach will help Ag + Open Space accelerate land conservation efforts and reach its goals to protect lands with the greatest benefits for our diverse communities, working lands, and natural systems.

An example of how proactive outreach to identified focus areas can help address urgent challenges is the current situation with dairies in the southern portion of the county. Most dairies in our county are located within the identified agricultural focus area, and staff are poised to initiate an outreach campaign within this region to make landowners aware of land conservation options that can provide a source of revenue at this critical time. This effort would also include establishing standard agricultural easement terms and average per acre values to shorten the timeframe for conservation easement acquisition. Ag + Open Space has conserved seven active dairies and eight agricultural properties that support local dairy operations and has already protected 20% or 21,400 acres of the agricultural focus areas. We can conserve more farms, ranches, and dairies more expeditiously through this proactive approach.

FARMLAND FOR ALL

For 30 years, Ag + Open Space has worked with willing landowners to conserve working farms, ranches, and dairies throughout Sonoma County, especially those most at risk for conversion to non-agricultural uses, primarily through the purchase of conservation easements. Staff will continue to do this work, especially in response to emergent trends and needs. Further, the Vital Lands Initiative called upon us to protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture; create a balanced portfolio of protected lands that represents the diverse types of agriculture in Sonoma County; and support access to land for farmers and ranchers. To that end, staff are recommending creation of the *Farmland for All* program to advance our agricultural land conservation work, with an initial focus on small farm properties and on enhancing equitable agricultural land access for farmers and ranchers. This program will result in a stronger and more inclusive agricultural industry and increased food security for our community.

Through this program, we aim to:

- Prevent conversion of agricultural land by placing conservation easements and affirmative covenants on agricultural land to restrict non-agricultural development and protect the agricultural values.
- Preserve agricultural conservation values by supporting responsible stewardship of land via stable land tenure and connecting landowners to best management practices and tools.
- Increase access to agricultural land now and in the future by reducing the price of the land by removing non-agricultural development rights and proactively connecting agricultural producers to opportunities to purchase land.
- Enhance equitable access to agricultural land.
- Support local food security by ensuring land remains in productive agricultural use.

The *Farmland for All* program will increase our ability to conserve smaller farm properties while continuing our work with larger agricultural properties and operators. We will use several tools to support this work, including:

- A project selection process that recognizes small agricultural properties and the unique characteristics and benefits they bring to the community.
- The option of an affirmative agricultural use covenant that requires ongoing agricultural use of the property.
- A buy-protect-sell model, where Ag + Open Space will purchase agricultural land outright and offer the property for sale to qualified farmers and ranchers subject to a conservation easement and an affirmative agricultural covenant, ensuring the preservation of agricultural uses of the property while also reducing the purchase price for the successful buyer. Staff will recommend sales to specific farmers and ranchers based on selection criteria that will be established by staff and presented to the Board at a later date.
- Sharing information with our easement landowners about leasing to agricultural producers, and potentially working with external partners to connect any interested landowners with producers seeking land.

By preserving a range of agricultural lands and addressing some of the major barriers for new farmers and ranchers looking for land, this program helps build:

- A strong agricultural economy: The more we can protect the land and infrastructure essential for agricultural production, and support new and diverse farmers in accessing land, the stronger our agricultural economy will be. More jobs will be created, more local food and fiber will be produced, and more diverse groups of people will be able to see themselves as part of the fabric of our agricultural community.
- A diversified agricultural community: When we support farmers and ranchers of all ages, races, and backgrounds, we help increase the diversity of crops, products, and land management styles so that our agricultural industry better represents the cultures and cuisines of everyone living in Sonoma County, while also helping local agricultural industry become more resilient and adaptable to changes in the market or the climate.
- The next generation: The average age of a farmer in California is 59 years old. If we are going to sustain and enhance our agricultural industry, we need to support the next generation of producers by ensuring access to land and the opportunity to establish themselves within the agricultural economy.
- Food security: Providing greater access to agricultural land helps to increase food security in Sonoma

County by allowing for production of locally grown or raised fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy, and other products.

Next Steps:

Ag + Open Space staff will update the Focus Areas and the *Farmland for All* program based upon input received from the board and the public. In the first quarter of 2023, staff will initiate outreach to one or two Focus Areas and will bring the *Farmland for All* process and criteria to the board for adoption.

Strategic Plan:

This item directly supports the County's Five-year Strategic Plan and is aligned with the following pillar, goal, and objective.

Pillar: Climate Action and Resiliency

Goal: Goal 5: Maximize opportunities for mitigation of climate change and adaptation through land conservation work and land use policies

Objective: Objective 2: Develop policies to maximize carbon sequestration and minimize loss of natural carbon sinks including old growth forests, the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and rangelands. Encourage agricultural and open space land management to maximize sequestration

Prior Board Actions:

January 26, 2021 (Board Action #1): 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.

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

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.

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY 22-23 Adopted	FY23-24 Projected	FY 24-25 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:

Expenditures related to the implementation of the Vital Lands Initiative, and these programs specifically, will be budgeted for during the regular County 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 at this time to implement these programs.

Attachments:

1. Vital Lands Initiative Implementation Update Presentation

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

N/A