

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 18, 2005

Vallejo Swett Ranch Ridge Trail Planning

File No. 05-022

Project Manager: Ann Buell

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$50,000 to the Solano Land Trust to plan a two-mile segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail and approximately four miles of community connector trails on the Vallejo Swett Ranch in Solano County.

LOCATION: The Vallejo Swett Ranch is located in the City of Vallejo, east of Highway 80 and north of the City of Benicia, Solano County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Maps (3)

Exhibit 2: Proposed Trail Alignment

Exhibit 3: Photographs

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) to the Solano Land Trust to plan a two-mile segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail and approximately four miles of community connector trails on the Vallejo Swett Ranch in Solano County. No Conservancy funds shall be disbursed until the Executive Officer of the Conservancy has approved in writing: a final work plan, including a budget and schedule; and any contractors proposed to be used.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the authority of the Conservancy under Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164 regarding projects of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The Solano Land Trust is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$50,000 to the Solano Land Trust to plan an approximately two-mile segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail and approximately four miles of community connector trails on the 905-acre Vallejo Swett Ranch in Solano County. This segment of the Ridge Trail will be a multi-use connection between Blue Rock Springs Park and the Hiddenbrooke Open Space (Exhibit 2), and will be planned in coordination with the resource management plan currently being developed for the Vallejo Swett, Eastern Swett, and King Ranch by the Solano Land Trust (SLT) and other participants. The proposed planning will lead up to the point of construction and will include four primary components:

- 1) The **Public Access Plan** will focus on the connection of this segment of the Ridge Trail to extant segments of the Ridge Trail on adjacent properties, connection to other neighboring trails, development of public parking/staging area(s) to serve the trail, vehicular access to the staging area(s) from public roads, and associated improvements such as gates and signs.
- 2) The **Public Access Management Plan** for the Ridge Trail will be developed in coordination with resource protection and enhancement efforts for the Vallejo Swett property and neighboring Eastern Swett and King Ranches, as well as for the 47-acre Orchards easement, which provides a vital connection between the Vallejo and Eastern Swett Ranches. It will analyze and describe the personnel and financial resources required and available for management of public access by SLT and the other participants.
- 3) **Trail and Construction Design, Permit Documents.** Trail design will reflect Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC) criteria and will be developed in consultation with trail design professionals. Designs will be detailed enough both for eventual construction and review and approval by the City of Vallejo for a Site Development Permit for the project.
- 4) **Environmental Review.** The grantee and contractors will begin the process of environmental review and compliance, possibly completing the process if resource protection and enhancement project planning being carried out by SLT with project participants is near completion.

SLT and BARTC will coordinate with the former property owner, PG&E, which is conducting biological surveys on the property as part of a habitat enhancement agreement it entered into with SLT when the Vallejo Swett and Eastern Swett Ranches were acquired. These biological surveys will contribute to the process of complying with the California Environmental Quality Act.

The planning and eventual implementation of this new segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail will lead to opportunities for public hiking, mountain bicycling, and horseback riding in a beautiful setting within close proximity to Vallejo, Fairfield, and Benicia. On the western ridge and the higher peaks, rock outcrops and wind-sculpted groves of bays and oaks alternate with rolling, windswept hills. There are dramatic views over the City of Vallejo and San Pablo Bay to the

west, Suisun Bay to the south, and higher peaks and ranges to the east (Mt. Diablo) and north (Exhibit 3).

The development of this link in the Bay Area Ridge Trail will meet goals and objectives of several regional plans, including the *Vallejo Trails Master Plan* (1988), *Tri-City and County Cooperative Plan for Open Space Preservation* (1994), the *Solano Countywide Trails Plan* (2002), and the *Solano Countywide Pedestrian Plan* (2004). The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council prepared the *Vallejo Ridge Trail Route Study* (2002) to bridge the gap in the Ridge Trail between Blue Rock Springs Park in Vallejo and the Ridge Trail in the Hiddenbrooke development (Exhibit 2).

This project will lead to increased public access to this property and the neighboring ranches now owned by SLT, helping validate public investment in the properties and meeting one of the purposes of the acquisition. The project may also indirectly support the formation and funding of a public open space agency in Solano County by exposing more people to the opportunities to recreate on the property while accentuating the fact that access will be limited to docent-led walks until a revenue source for long-term management is established.

SLT is a nonprofit land trust incorporated in 1986. Its mission is to preserve and protect farmlands, wetlands, rangelands, open space, and wildlife habitat. It currently holds fee title or easements over more than 15,000 acres of Solano County lands. Key holdings include the King Ranch, Eastern Swett Ranch, Vallejo Swett Ranch, Rush Ranch in Suisun Marsh, Lynch Canyon, and the Jepson Prairie Preserve. Regionally, Solano County ranks last among the nine Bay Area counties in land protection, with approximately 11 percent of its land protected to date. There is strong public and legislative support for this project (Exhibit 4).

Site Description: The approximately 905-acre Vallejo Swett Ranch is located in southwestern Solano County, between Highways I-80 and I-680, in an area known as the Tri-City and County Cooperative Planning Area (Exhibit 1, third page). There is a 23-acre in-holding known as the McIntyre Ranch, which is owned by the Greater Vallejo Recreation District, has limited public access, and is currently operated as a horse ranch.

The property is characterized by moderate to steep slopes (25-80%) with several narrow drainages and a wide and prominent central drainage valley that runs from west to east, roughly dividing the property into north and south sections. Elevations range from 180-820 feet (50-250 meters). There are spectacular views of San Pablo Bay, Suisun Bay, Mount Diablo and Mount Tamalpais. The drainage valley has an intermittent and unnamed stream running through most of its length with two reservoirs and several small ponds located within and just above it. This stream exits the property into a tributary of Sulphur Springs Creek that runs through Sky Valley and eventually drains into Lake Herman to the south, and from Lake Herman into the Carquinez Strait. A separate drainage creek exits the Vallejo Swett Ranch near the southwest corner of the property and eventually runs into Sulphur Springs Creek as well.

Natural community types include riparian, lentic, non-native annual grassland and serpentine bunchgrass grassland. The property supports a diverse assemblage of plant and animal species, including up to 307 vascular plants, 116 birds, 21 mammals, and 8 reptiles and amphibians. Of particular importance is the exceptionally high-quality red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) habitat.

The adjacent Blue Rock Springs Park, to which the Ridge Trail will connect, can currently be accessed from central Vallejo via open space corridors and trails. Other trail corridors exist, or are being planned, to connect from the cities of Benicia, via Lake Herman Park and Benicia State Recreation Area, and from Fairfield, via Cordelia Area open space and trails linking through the King and Eastern Swett Ranches. Trail connections exist from southern Napa County through the Newell Open Space Preserve to SLT's Lynch Canyon Preserve and south to the Hiddenbrooke open space at the boundary of the project site (Exhibit 1, third map).

The Vallejo Swett Ranch has two main gated access points: one on the northwestern boundary, closest to Vallejo, and one on the northeastern boundary, which leads to the Hiddenbrooke development. The northwestern gate is accessible from St. John's Mine Road via Columbus Parkway. An interior paved road proceeds from this gate through the entire property and exits the northeastern corner above the Hiddenbrooke development, where a locked gate marks a prominent trailhead of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. This access point can be reached via the American Canyon exit off of I-80, and through the Hiddenbrooke development.

Project History: The Vallejo Swett Ranch is the third of three ranches the Solano Land Trust purchased from Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) between 2002 and 2005 with \$3,775,000 in funding from the Conservancy and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, among other funders. Although the King Ranch and the Eastern Swett Ranch both have great public recreational potential, the Vallejo Swett Ranch is the only one of the three that contains part of the 500-mile Bay Area Ridge Trail alignment.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$50,000
Solano Land Trust	<u>57,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$107,000

The Conservancy's contribution of \$50,000 is expected to come from the Conservancy's FY 2002/2003 appropriation from the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (Bay Program). As discussed below, implementation of the Bay Area Ridge Trail is one of the goals of the Bay Area Conservancy Program.

Matching funds come from several sources. A red-legged frog mitigation project on the King Ranch, which included funding for the development of a management plan for all three ranches; a commitment from PG&E to fund certain resource and enhancement studies on the Eastern Swett and Vallejo Swett Ranches; volunteered time from the SLT board; and SLT staff time.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project serves to implement the Bay Area Ridge Trail and is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area. Consistent with 31162(a), this project will improve public access to and around ridgetops through completion of a segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail between Blue Rock Springs Park and the Hiddenbrooke development. Consistent with that provision, planning activities will ensure that the rights of

private property owners are respected, agricultural operations are not adversely impacted, and environmentally sensitive areas are avoided.

Additionally, under Section 31162(c) the Conservancy may assist in the implementation of adopted plans of local governments and special districts, and under Section 31162(d) may assist with projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes. This project will help implement elements of the *Vallejo Trails Master Plan* (1988), *Tri-City and County Cooperative Plan for Open Space Preservation* (1994), the *Solano Countywide Trails Plan* (2002), and the *Solano Countywide Pedestrian Plan* (2004), and will lead to the development of trails and increased public access for urban populations surrounding the Vallejo Swett property. Section 31163(a) directs the Conservancy to cooperate with nonprofit land trusts and other organizations in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area. Completion of the Ridge Trail is one of the goals identified in the Bay Area Open Space Council's "*Regional Needs Briefing Book*."

Consistent with 31163(c), this project 1) supports adopted local and regional plans, as stated above, 2) serves a regional constituency comprising the cities of Benicia, Vallejo, Vacaville, Fairfield, unincorporated areas of Solano County, and nearby Napa and Contra Costa Counties, 3) can be implemented in a timely way because of the available matching funds and complementary resource planning work to be carried out concurrently on this property and also on the Eastern Swett and King properties (see "Project Summary"), 4) provides opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, because some of the costs of the Ridge Trail Planning can be shared with the costs of developing a Resource Management Plan for the three ranches together, and 5) includes matching funds as described under "Project Financing."

Under Section 31111, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop plans for purposes consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code. This project is consistent with Division 21 as described above.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will result in the development of the plans needed to build the Bay Area Ridge Trail through the Vallejo Swett Ranch and make this and other community connector trails on the property accessible to the public.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

3. **Support of the public:** The proposed Vallejo Ranch Ridge Trail project is consistent with the intent of the acquisition of the Vallejo Swett Ranch, completed in January 2005, which included among its purposes a regional recreational element. In that sense, supporters of that acquisition may be viewed as supporters of this proposed project as well. Support has been expressed by Congressman George Miller, Congresswoman Ellen Tauscher, Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, Assemblywoman Pat Wiggins, Tri-City and County Cooperative Planning Group for Agriculture and Open Space, County of Solano, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, Carquinez Strait Preservation Trust, City of Benicia, City of Fairfield, City of Vallejo, Greater Vallejo Recreation District, Greenbelt Alliance, Solano County Orderly Growth Committee, and Pacific Gas & Electric (Exhibit 4).
4. **Location:** This project is located within the city limits of Vallejo, east of Highway 80. It is located within the Tri-City and County Cooperative Planning Area and is easily accessible to the populations of Contra Costa and Napa Counties in addition to all of Solano County.
5. **Need:** Matching funds for public access improvements for the Vallejo Swett Ranch and the Eastern Swett and King Ranches are already in place but are not sufficient to also cover the detailed planning that is needed to prepare for construction of the Bay Area Ridge Trail through the Vallejo Swett property.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Bay Area Ridge Trail is a regional attraction, with plans to link 500 miles of upland habitat around the greater Bay Area. It is open to hikers, equestrians, mountain bicyclists, and outdoor enthusiasts of all types.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** SLT needs to develop a long-term management plan for the property by September 30, 2005 per its grant agreement with the Conservancy for the purchase of the Vallejo Swett Ranch, and that plan needs to include a plan for the construction of trails. This deadline may be extended by the Executive Officer of the Conservancy if necessary.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** SLT is ready to start on the project immediately because matching funds have been committed and biological surveys needed for the environmental review process have already been started.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above. Also, the Conservancy is committed to helping with the completion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail and to provide support to Bay Area counties that have proportionately less open space, which is the case with Solano County.
15. **Cooperation:** The most salient cooperation in this project is between the former landowner, PG&E, SLT, and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: This project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 because it involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions and will not have a legally binding effect on later activities. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.