

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 20, 2007

POFF ACQUISITION

File No. 07-073-01
Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$750,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District for the acquisition of the 1,235-acre Poff property for addition to the adjacent Sonoma Coast State Beach in western Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Bodega Bay, Sonoma County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Program

EXHIBITS:

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map: Sonoma Coast](#)

Exhibit 2: [Poff Property Area Parcel Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Photographs of the Poff Property](#)

Exhibit 4: [Potential Trail Linkages Map](#)

Exhibit 5: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOS D) for the acquisition of the 1,235-acre Poff property (Assessor’s Parcel Numbers 101-150-005 and 101-150-006) for addition to the adjacent Sonoma Coast State Beach in western Sonoma County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for acquisition of the real property, SCAPOS D shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Office of the Conservancy (“the Executive Officer”):

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- a. All relevant acquisition documents, including, but not limited to, appraisal, environmental assessment, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions, and documents related to title.
 - b. Evidence that SCAPOSD has obtained all funds necessary to complete the acquisition.
2. SCAPOSD shall pay no more than fair market value for the property as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. SCAPOSD shall permanently dedicate the property in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer for the purposes of protecting, restoring and enhancing habitat and open space, and providing public access where appropriate.
 4. Within a reasonable time following acquisition of the real property, SCAPOSD shall prepare a management plan for the property that is consistent with the purposes for which it is being acquired.
 5. SCAPOSD shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.”

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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the protection of natural habitats and resources of regional importance within the San Francisco Bay Area.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD) for the acquisition of the 1,235-acre Poff property (Assessor’s Parcel Numbers 101-150-005 and 101-150-006) for addition to the adjacent Sonoma Coast State Beach in western Sonoma County (Exhibits 1 and 2).

The Poff property has been identified as a priority area by regional plans including the Sonoma Land Trust’s *Sonoma County Coast Parcel Study* (1999), The Nature Conservancy’s *Conserving the Landscapes of Sonoma County* (2003) and the SCAPOSD’s *Connecting Communities and the Land: A Long Range Acquisition Plan* (2006). The property is also located within the Coastal

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Scenic Landscape Unit of the Sonoma County General Plan (1989). California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is highly interested in accepting the property in the future as a critical addition to the Sonoma Coast Beach State Beach (See Exhibit 5 for letter of support from DPR).

The property is the largest privately-owned, unprotected parcel between Bodega Bay and the Russian River. Its scenic value is readily apparent in its rolling grassland covered hills visible from Highway 1 and the panoramic ocean views down to Point Reyes from the property's highest point, Wright Hill (Exhibit 3). Wildlife and habitat are diverse on the property and the landscape includes coastal prairie, a redwood grove and mixed woodland forest.

The property is bordered on three sides by the protected lands of the Red Hill addition to Sonoma Coast State Beach and two conservation easements held by SCAPOSD on the Willow Creek "Seed Orchard" property and the Colliss property. As a result of this location, the property can provide spectacular open space, wildlife and trail connections with the California Coastal Trail and other regional trails. The property offers excellent opportunities for future camping, backpacking, horseback riding and other recreational access and will, when accepted by DPR, be included as an addition to the state's second most visited park, Sonoma Coast State Beach. In addition, the proposed project holds potential for cultural and historical interpretation as the character and nature of coastal ranching are preserved in the large on-site barn and 1900s homestead which remained in use without electricity or other modernizing improvements (Exhibits 3 and 4).

In 1990, Sonoma County voters approved the creation of the SCAPOSD and a ¼ cent sales tax for the purpose of permanently protecting Sonoma County's diverse agricultural, natural resources and scenic open space lands for all generations, and in 2006, voted to continue the tax for another 20 years. The agency has protected nearly 70,000 acres of priority land through acquisition and conservation easements throughout Sonoma County. Significant coastal properties in the area protected by the District with support from the Conservancy include Willow Creek and Red Hill.

Site Description:

Consisting of 1,235 acres, the Poff ranch property is the largest privately-owned, unprotected land holding between the Russian River and Bodega Bay on the Sonoma Coast. The property is located approximately one mile east of Highway One on Wright Hill Road, eleven miles south of Jenner and three miles north of Bodega Bay. Access to the property is through the Red Hill property, purchased for conservation by SCAPOSD, the Conservancy and Sonoma Land Trust in 2000 and now a part of Sonoma Coast State Beach. With the Willow Creek "Seed Orchard" conservation easement to the north, the Colliss conservation easement to the south, and Sonoma Coast State Beach to the west, the Poff property offers the potential to permanently protect significant regional habitat and wildlife corridors and holds great potential for regional trail linkages.

The landscape of the property is characterized by highly scenic hills of coastal grassland, stands of mixed coastal forest including a small redwood grove, spectacular ocean views and natural

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hiking destinations including large rock outcroppings and a 1,190 foot rise to the top of Wright Hill (see Exhibit 3 for site photographs). The variety of forest and coastal prairie habitats on the property can support a range of wildlife and birds including California red-legged frogs, spotted owl and marbled murrelet.

Cattle grazing is a current and historical use of the land, and structures on the property consist of a 1900s ranch house, a workshop and a large working barn that all retain a significant amount of rural California ranching character.

Project History:

Sonoma County conservation partners have recognized the Poff property for its scenic value from Highway One, its natural resources and its conservation potential for decades. Plans identifying the property as a conservation priority include Sonoma Land Trust's Sonoma County Parcel Study (1999), The Nature Conservancy's *Conserving the Landscapes of Sonoma County* (2003), and SCAPOSD's *Connecting Communities and the Land: A Long Range Acquisition Plan* (2006). The property is also located within Sonoma County's General Plan Scenic Landscape Unit area (1989).

A late 1990s parcel study conducted by SCAPOSD on connections to SCAPOSD protected lands and State Parks between Bodega Bay and the Russian River identified the Poff property as a regional priority. Acquisition of the property would meet SCAPOSD objectives of creating a connected system of recreational lands by expanding parks, protecting scenic land visible from highly traveled roads that keep the rural character of the County, and protecting lands with potential for connectivity that support diverse plant communities and wildlife species.

The property was listed for sale in April 2007, and SCAPOSD immediately initiated coordination with California Department of Parks and Recreation, Sonoma Land Trust, LandPaths and the Conservancy among other conservation partners. Based on the potential for public access, recreation, historical interpretation and connectivity for corridors of wildlife, open space and regional trail systems, and the interest of DPR to accept the property for future inclusion in the Sonoma Coast State Park, SCAPOSD entered into a purchase agreement on the property in June 2007.

The SCAPOSD is now in the process of completing a full narrative appraisal, a Phase I Environmental Assessment and other due diligence. Contingent on final approvals by the SCAPOSD Authority and Board of Directors, the SCAPOSD will work to complete the acquisition by Fall 2007. At this juncture, it appears that the acquisition may have to be completed within a day or so of the September 20 meeting at which the Conservancy authorization will be sought. If that occurs, Conservancy staff will be unable to provide funding directly to escrow prior to closing. Accordingly, if necessary, SCAPOSD will obtain bridge funding so as to be able to close when required, and the Conservancy will reimburse SCAPOSD for the purchase price up to the amount of the proposed authorization.

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PROJECT FINANCING:

SCAPOS	\$4,850,000
Conservancy	<u>\$ 750,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$5,600,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy's fiscal year 2005/06 appropriation from the Habitat Conservation Fund (under the "California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990" – Proposition 117). The Conservancy is authorized to use Habitat Conservation Fund monies for the protection of natural habitats necessary to protect deer and mountain lions and/or rare, endangered threatened or fully protected species through acquisition as is proposed in the Poff Acquisition project. In addition, as required by Proposition 117, SCAPOS will, as a condition of the grant, prepare a management plan. Finally, consistent with Proposition 117, it is contemplated that access will be provided to the extent that it does not interfere with habitat protection.

The 2005-06 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Habitat Conservation Fund was, in turn, derived from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50). Proposition 50 authorizes the use of these funds for the purpose of protecting coastal watersheds through projects to restore land and water resources. The proposed project would ensure the permanent protection of coastal draining watershed land by preventing development and protecting natural resources. Proposition 50 also requires that projects be consistent with adopted local and regional watershed management plans (Water Code Section 79507). The North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's Basin Plan (1996) is the adopted watershed plan for projects in the Lower Russian River and Bodega Bay area. Consistent with this plan, the proposed project will enhance the water quality in the region by permanently protecting the property's wildlife and habitat resources through acquisition and provision of a resource management plan.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Poff acquisition project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 (Sections 31160 et seq.) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to public and private agencies and organizations.

Consistent with §31162, the property to be acquired under the proposed project is located in Sonoma County, one of the nine bay-area counties, and will help to achieve several of the primary goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. Pursuant to Section 31162 (b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open space resources of regional importance. The proposed project will protect the regionally important natural resources and habitat through acquisition of the Poff property for permanent conservation.

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Consistent with Section 31163(a), the proposed project is a cooperative effort with a public agency and a willing seller for land acquisition in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In addition, the project satisfies all of the five criteria for determining project priority under §31163(c), as follows: 1) the project serves a multi-jurisdictional constituency, since it will preserve open space and scenic areas for the enjoyment of both local residents and visitors who come from across the region and the nation to the area in which the project is located; 2) the project can be implemented in a timely fashion: once funded, the acquisition is expected to occur within several months; 3) in the event the project is not implemented promptly, the opportunity for completion of the purchase of the property may be lost; 4) the Conservancy funding for the acquisition is matched by the far greater contribution of funds by SCAPOSD; and 5) the project is fully consistent with and supported by adopted local plans, including the Sonoma County Local Coastal Plan and General Plan, as discussed in the “Consistency With Local Coastal Program Policies” section, below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan as it supports the following Goals and Objectives:

Goal 4 – Objective A: by acquiring significant coastal resource properties and areas for habitat and wildlife corridors.

Goal 5 – Objective B: by protecting biological diversity in coastal areas and inland habitat areas.

Goal 10 – Objective A: by acquiring watershed areas and regionally significant property in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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:** There is strong support for protecting the Poff property among

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conservation partners and representatives such as State Senator Pat Wiggins, Assemblymember Patty Berg and Sonoma County Supervisor Michael Reilly (For letters of support, see Exhibit 5).

4. **Location:** The proposed project is located in the nine-county Bay Area, approximately one mile east of Highway One, three miles north of the town of Bodega Bay and eleven miles south of Jenner in western Sonoma County.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is necessary to move quickly on the opportunity to protect this high priority property through acquisition. The project will support the Conservancy's mandate to conserve significant coastal resources and regionally significant property.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The significant visual, biological, recreational and cultural-historical features of the property and its potential for connectivity of regional trails and parklands will enhance the greater-than-local interest generated by Sonoma Coast Beach State Park, the state's second most visited state park.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** An opportunity exists now as the Poff property has recently been placed on the open market and there is an immediate need to act to provide long-term conservation protection.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed acquisition will protect the habitat of the Poff property and provide for potential future trail corridors between inland park property and the California Coastal Trail (See Exhibit 4).
9. **Leverage:** Conservancy funds will provide 12 to 15% of the total project cost for the Poff acquisition, leveraging approximately \$5 million in SCAPOSD funding.
10. **Readiness:** The SCAPOSD is finalizing the terms of the purchase agreement and is in a position to close by the end of 2007 with Conservancy support of the proposed project.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
12. **Cooperation:** The SCAPOSD is a regional conservation partner with a record of collaboration with the Conservancy, State Parks, Sonoma Land Trust, private property owners and nonprofit conservation organizations including LandPaths and Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods. The organization plays an important role in the West County/Coastal Collaborative Acquisition Working Group facilitated by the Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Poff property is located within the Coastal Zone and the proposed acquisition of the property for conservation and public access is consistent with relevant portions of the Sonoma's Local Coastal Program on the Environment, Resources and Recreation (Sections III, VI and V). The

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proposed project is consistent with the Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General plan which calls for the protection of the county's water, forest and biotic resources (Sections 3.0, 4.0 and 5.1). The project area is within in the General Plan's Coastal Scenic Landscape Unit and acquisition of the property for conservation purposes will provide for the protection of coastal prairie habitat (Section 5.2).

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Poff acquisition project simply involves the fee title acquisition of real property in order to preserve it as scenic open space and for public access purposes. No development is currently contemplated. The acquisition of the property as provided in this staff recommendation is thus categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15325, which exempts transfers of ownership of interests in land in order to preserve open space, including existing natural conditions. Staff will file a notice of exemption upon Board approval.