

34. San Geronimo Conservation Easement and Flow Enhancement

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that WCB approve this project as proposed; allocate \$2,203,000 from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Fund of 2014 (Proposition 1), CWC Section 79733; authorize staff to enter into appropriate agreements necessary to accomplish this project; and authorize staff and CDFW to proceed substantially as planned.

Project Title:	San Geronimo Conservation Easement and Flow Enhancement
Project Type:	Conservation Easement (135± acres)
Applicant/Grantee:	Marin Open Space Trust
Amount Recommended:	\$2,203,000
Funding Partners:	California Natural Resources Agency
Landowner(s):	The Trust for Public Land
County:	Marin
Strategic Plan:	Goals: B.1 Objectives: SI 2.3, 2.4
Disadvantaged Community:	Not within a disadvantaged community

LOCATION

The San Geronimo Conservation Easement and Flow Enhancement acquisition project (Project) will occur on 135± acres of the former San Geronimo Golf Course (Property), in the Lagunitas Creek Watershed (LCW) located approximately eight miles northwest of San Raphael in Marin County. San Geronimo and Larsen creeks flow through the Property. Larsen Creek is a tributary of San Geronimo Creek, which is tributary to Lagunitas Creek.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The former 18-hole golf course was operated between 1965 and 2018, when it was sold to The Trust for Public Land (TPL). Golf course operations were ceased in January 2019, but TPL continues to exercise its appropriative water right. The Property provides valuable wildlife connectivity across the San Geronimo Valley floor connecting adjacent habitat areas to the north and south; supports important riparian, oak, and grassland habitats; and provides extensive and diverse habitat for native flora and fauna.

The Project entails the acquisition of a conservation easement by Marin Open Space Trust (MOST) over 135± acres of the former San Geronimo Golf Course in Marin County, and the permanent dedication of 20 acre-feet per year (AFY) as instream flow to Larsen Creek to support special-status salmonids. The terms of the conservation easement will restrict land use on the Property to open space and passive recreation in perpetuity, preventing any conversion or subdivision of the Property that could significantly diminish or impair these values, while enabling comprehensive restoration of the Property.

The Project includes temporary forbearance, followed by permanent dedication (via California Water Code Section 1707) of the full amount of the appropriative

right (20 acre-feet per year) to instream flow in Larsen Creek. Both the temporary and permanent forbearance requirements will be reinforced through prohibitions on diversion, well development, and irrigation in the conservation easement.

The Property is of great interest for conservation, restoration, and preservation of stream flow because of its location spanning the San Geronimo Valley, which contains the last undammed tributary at the upper reaches of the LCW – a watershed that is of statewide significance for the federal and state-listed Central California coast coho salmon, steelhead trout, and California freshwater shrimp. Chinook salmon in the LCW are considered a Species of Concern by federal and state agencies. Significant reaches of San Geronimo Creek and Larsen Creek flow through the Property, and both serve as critical spawning and rearing habitat for coho salmon and steelhead trout. However, use of a complex water extraction system to irrigate the golf course has impaired fish habitat by diverting water from Larsen Creek during a critical time for adult salmon migration, impacting habitat values in both Larsen and downstream reaches of San Geronimo Creeks. In addition, historic uses of the Property resulted in significant alteration of the floodplain and riparian valley habitat that once existed.

The Project's in-stream dedication will permanently prevent the removal of these flows in Larsen and San Geronimo creeks. The Project also involves the installation and monitoring of a new stream flow gauge on Larsen Creek to evaluate stream flow conditions and responses to the instream flow dedication. Finally, the permanent protection of the Property and its associated water right will provide site control for the comprehensive restoration of Larsen and San Geronimo creeks, their floodplains, and riparian areas.

The Property will also provide a publicly accessible natural open space that is available to support compatible community and recreational uses, consistent with the Conservation Easement. For example, a portion of the existing network of golf cart paths will be adapted to a publicly accessible, multi-use trail system, with connectivity to surrounding open spaces.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND NEEDS

The Conservation Easement will be owned and managed by MOST. MOST will hold, manage, and be responsible for monitoring and enforcing the Conservation Easement in perpetuity per WCB grant terms. A baseline report will be completed by MOST and approved by WCB. The Conservation Easement permits access to the Property by both MOST and WCB staff for monitoring purposes.

PROJECT FUNDING

Partners	Amount
WCB	\$2,203,000
Other	\$1,000,000
Total	\$3,203,000

The purchase price will be at or below fair market value as determined through a DGS approved appraisal.

The majority of the Project costs will be for acquiring the conservation easement. Additional Project costs will be for instream dedication, monitoring, and reporting.

The other secured funding source is the California Natural Resources Agency.

CEQA REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The Project is proposed as exempt from CEQA pursuant to the State CEQA Guidelines, Section 15313, Class 13, Acquisition of Lands for Wildlife Conservation Purposes, as an acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes, including preservation of fish and wildlife habitat; Section 15301, Class 1, Existing Facilities, as operation, repair, maintenance, and minor alteration of existing facilities for maintenance of wildlife habitat areas and stream flows to protect fish and wildlife resources; and Section 15304, Class 4, Minor Alterations to Land, as minor alterations to land and water. Subject to approval of this proposal by WCB, the appropriate NOE will be filed with the State Clearinghouse.

