

SUMMER 2022

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... to protect the land forever



Restoring California's wetlands is key to protecting biodiversity and increasing climate resilience.

WE ARE ALREADY DELIVERING ON 30X30 PRIORITIES

California has joined more than 72 countries, including the United States, in setting a goal of conserving 30 percent of our lands and coastal waters by 2030. Achieving this goal will allow California to protect biodiversity, expand equitable access to nature and build resilience to climate change. The Land Trust has been working hard at the state level to set these 30x30 goals, and we are already delivering on key priorities.

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A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

DELIVERING ON 30X30

As Sonoma's glorious wildflower shows give way to warm summer days, we couldn't be more excited here at the Land Trust. For the first time since Covid-19 made "social distancing" a household word, Bay Camp is back! We're so looking forward to inviting youngsters aged seven to 12 to get muddy in San Pablo National Wildlife Refuge.

At the same time, one of our restoration projects, Lakeville Creek, became one of the very first to be approved under California's Cutting the Green Tape initiative. That's a big deal because it's about fast-tracking implementation of badly needed landscape restoration and

climate resilience projects to achieve the ambitious goals of California's 30x30 plan.

The 30x30 (conserving 30% of California's lands and waters by 2030) plan is the first of its kind in the nation. It signals broad recognition—at last—of what needs to be done to ensure a future for all living things, including us, in a rapidly changing world. As a movement, land trusts along with partners and supporters, have protected about 21 percent of California's lands up to now. But we can't afford to be complacent as climate change and habitat loss accelerate biodiversity collapse, wildfire, sea-level rise and drought. That's why we've been helping to shape and

deliver on the 30x30 plan, not just for ourselves, but for California, our country and, ultimately, our world.

If you haven't guessed, that's the theme of this newsletter: 30x30—two years in and only eight to go. It will go fast. Read on to find out what we're doing and how you can be a Force for Nature!

For the land,

EAMON O'BYRNE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Read on to find out what we've been doing to help shape and deliver on the 30x30 plan!

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MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations.

Contact: Sonoma Land Trust, 822 Fifth Street, Santa Rosa, CA 95404, (707) 526-6930. Printed on recycled paper using soy-based inks.





The Land Trust's Bay Camp, a bilingual environmental education summer camp, expands access to nature for the next generation of land stewards.

PROTECT BIODIVERSITY: Biodiversity is essential for ecosystem health and, by extension, the health and wellbeing of our communities. From the San Pablo Baylands, through the Marin Coast-Blue Ridge Critical Linkage and into the Russian River watershed, the Land Trust is acquiring and restoring properties that are crucial for supporting the plants and animals that call Sonoma County home. This includes the stewardship of our 17 preserves using state-of-the-art science.



Creating habitat for endangered species, such as this beautiful callippe silverspot butterfly, is just one way we're protecting biodiversity.

EXPAND EQUITABLE ACCESS TO NATURE: We are partnering on innovative, community-centered projects that will expand available park and open space access in Santa Rosa, Petaluma and the Sonoma Valley with a focus on communities that lack parks or don't have access to nearby outdoor opportunities. These properties also include significant habitat and cultural value.

BUILD RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE IMPACTS: Using nature-based solutions, we are implementing several landscape-scale projects to directly address climate resilience and the increasingly challenging cycle of wildfires, drought, sea-level rise and flooding.

Among the regional initiatives we are participating in that address the state's three key objectives and could be considered for programmatic, multiyear funding through the 30x30 initiative are the following:

• **Russian River Coho Water Resources Partnership:** To increase water reliability for communities and for endangered fish populations.

• **Green Valley Creek Restoration Project:** To protect critical habitat for Coho salmon recovery and address road flooding.

• **Resilient SR37 Project:** To restore natural infrastructure to protect transportation needs (State Route 37) and protect and restore 20,000 acres of sensitive marshland habitats in the San Pablo Baylands by 2030.

• **Sonoma Creek Baylands Strategy:** To protect and restore more than 10,000 acres of tidal wetlands.

• **Sonoma Developmental Center, McCormick Ranch and the Sonoma Mountain Vernal Pools:** To increase the protection of a regionally important wildlife corridor that, at the narrow junction, connects large habitat areas on the Marin Coast with the Blue Ridge mountains of Napa and Lake Counties.

• **Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative:** To restore fire's historic ecological role on up to 20,000 acres of Sonoma County's wildlands, thereby promoting forest health and biodiversity, and improving the safety of human communities.

THE MANY BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION RANCHING

The Land Trust recently began a new cattle grazing plan at the Pole Mountain Preserve that is designed to improve native plant and soil health, maintain grassland species diversity, and reduce thatch and brush (fine fuels that can carry wildfire into forests and woodlands).

While grasslands are part of the native landscape of Sonoma County, year-round cattle grazing has created non-native grasslands that often crowd out native species.

We've introduced a new, science-based plan to seasonally graze an appropriate number of cattle for the preserve. Cattle will graze on non-native grasses during the spring, while the invasives still taste good. This reduces the number of non-native seeds and competition with native plants. Livestock will be removed prior to fall, preventing them from trampling oak seedlings and damaging vegetation along the creeks. Over time, native plants should be able to repopulate the area.

GRASSLANDS FOR CATTLE AND BIRDS

This plan should also benefit bird species. In 2011, a study by Point Blue Conservation Science suggested that well-managed grazing results in a higher diversity and abundance of grassland birds, such as the Grasshopper Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow, than in un-grazed grassland areas.

Compared to other ways of controlling invasive plants, such as herbicide or mowing, well-managed livestock grazing is the most feasible management tool in this steep and remote terrain. Livestock grazing also supports our local food system and economy and maintains the historical uses of the land.

Sonoma Land Trust is partnering with Point Blue Conservation Science as part of its Rangeland Monitoring Network to measure the ecological health of its coastal rangeland preserves.

A FORCE FOR NATURE CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Thank you to the generous individuals, businesses, foundations and government partners who have joined A Force for Nature: The Sonoma Land Trust Campaign with generous pledges and gifts. During the first year of the public phase of our campaign, we raised \$16 million in gifts, grants and commitments, bringing our campaign total to \$74 million. This ongoing campaign is helping us conserve and restore some of the most strategic parcels of land in Sonoma County—work that has multiple benefits for people, plants and wildlife.

Stay tuned for our midsummer campaign update, when we'll also share more about how we're fostering the next generation of land stewards through our bilingual summer camp, a program for teens, hikes for families and more. Learn more about making a special campaign gift, pledge or planned giving commitment by contacting Shannon Nichols, director of philanthropy, (707) 933-7220, shannon@sonomalandtrust.org.



- Expanding Taylor Mountain Regional Park as well as Hood Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserves
- Protecting wildlife corridors on Sonoma Mountain
- Conserving three miles on the Russian River
- Helping with coho salmon recovery
- Advocating for smart development at Sonoma Developmental Center
- Supporting creation of Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway and helping with the Petaluma River Park

BETTER REGULATIONS FOR BETTER WILDFIRE RESILIENCY

You generally won't find the words "*regulatory permitting process*" and "*exciting*" together, but some exciting changes in California's environmental regulatory processes will allow us to do some of our most important stewardship work—changing how wildfire moves across the landscape, and managing our lands so that fires are cooler, less intense and less severe.

As land managers with the threat of wildfire always at our backs, we need to do exponentially more forest and woodland management—and do it faster—to reduce the impacts of climate change. California, which is spending billions of dollars on wildfire resiliency projects, agrees. But all these projects are subject to a regulatory requirement called the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

One of the most challenging aspects of doing restoration projects is navigating CEQA. In a nutshell, CEQA is meant to ensure that development projects analyze and mitigate environmental impacts. However, restoration projects also need to go through the process. In some cases, this process can unnecessarily delay projects for months or years and cost the project champion (for example the Land Trust) tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Sometimes it costs more to go through CEQA than it does to put the project on the ground.

So, the California Board of Forestry and key California regulatory agencies



Understory thinning—removing the accumulation of dead plant material and ladder fuels, as shown here—makes the forest more resilient in the event of a wildfire.

streamlined the CEQA process to make the regulatory review easier, shorter and less expensive. They created a special, comprehensive Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), which applies to more than 20 million acres of Non-Federal California forest land, woodlands, and grasslands.

With financial assistance from the Board of Forestry, we used the PEIR to develop a Vegetation Treatment Project (VTP) that will cover wildfire resilience projects (forest thinning, shaded fuel breaks,

prescribed fire) on four of our preserves: Pole Mountain and Little Black Mountain, on the coast, and, inland, Laufenburg Ranch and Live Oaks Ranch. We will execute the projects in partnership with the North Sonoma County Fire Prevention District.

Even better, with the VTP in place, we are "shovel ready" and eligible for a variety of grants from the state and local funding sources for future wildfire resiliency projects.



STRATEGIC PLAN ONLINE

You previewed our strategic plan through our A Force for Nature campaign (weareforcefornature.org), where we invited you to explore six natural solutions—focal strategies—designed to improve our climate resilience. At webinars and community forums, you heard how our plan will contribute to California's 30X30 initiative and increase equitable access to nature's benefits. Now you can explore our strategic plan in depth at sonomalandtrust.org/strategicplan.

RESTORING LAKEVILLE CREEK—ANATOMY OF A NATURAL STREAM

If you were asked to imagine a stream, you might envision a single channel meandering across a valley. Streams in the lower Petaluma River Valley were forced to fit that model as they exited the coastal hillsides into small valleys.

Prior to a century or more of land management geared toward agriculture, however, these streams would have been a network of shallow channels, or swales, fanning out over grassy floodplains or trickling into freshwater wetlands. Bigger storms would occasionally have submerged these wetlands, recharging groundwater and sometimes making a connection between the freshwater and neighboring tidal wetlands.

Smaller streams from the coastal hills, such as Lakeville Creek, the target of our restoration work, would have become a network of shallow, grassy swales that didn't flow in summer. Vegetation would probably have been a combination of grassy wet meadows and willow groves.

Today, Lakeville Creek is a deeply eroded, unnatural stream, with streamside vegetation largely absent. Because it is so deeply eroded, it can't overtop its banks and spill onto the floodplain—a process that is critical to healthy streams. It's a familiar look across the Western United States as people have sought to control and confine streams. Once a stream has reached this stage, however, it cannot restore itself. That's where Sonoma Land Trust comes in.



Lakeville Creek, once restored to its natural state, will look something like this grassy, wet meadow.

We are restoring Lakeville Creek to its natural state, which is more like a long wetland than a stream, or what's called Stage Zero, a concept that was defined only about a decade ago. Our work includes removing soil from the middle reach of the creek, where, sometime in the past 70 years, it was filled in during attempts to smooth out adjacent hillside tributaries. We will then use that soil to bring the lower reach of the stream up to ground level. We will plant thousands of native rushes, sedges and grasses, a few

clusters of native willows and some California buckeyes on neighboring hillsides. It's a slow process, but returning the creek to its natural state will raise groundwater levels, restore seasonal wetlands, and create wildlife and plant habitat. Over time—as we restore adjacent tidal marshes—we envision a complete ecosystem in which streams feed wetlands that flourish along the edges of the bay's tidal marshes.



CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT GUIDES WATER-FOCUSED WORK

In a brochure about our Russian River Subwatershed Conservation Assessment, we summarize how and where we're directing our water-focused work. Through the assessment, we determined that, by improving streamflow where it really matters, we can improve conditions for salmonid fish, such as coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. The brochure is available on our website at [What we do > Where we work > Russian River Watershed](#).

PRESERVING NATURE NEARBY

Part of the Land Trust's Strategic Plan is to expand access to new parks close to where people live. We call this focal strategy: Preserving Nature Nearby. Examples include the Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway, Sonoma Developmental Center and Petaluma River Park.

Fundraising for a new park can take a long time as it has many stages and spans the entire project lifecycle, from acquisition, to planning, to development and to ongoing stewardship.

Take Santa Rosa's Southeast Greenway, for example. Once the land is acquired from Caltrans, there will have to be a

park-specific plan, followed by new park amenities, such as trails, community gardens, play areas and more. After that comes stewardship, including program activities for all ages, care and maintenance, and volunteer and community involvement. These steps all take time, community support—and funding.

The good news is that, by preserving open space, the Southeast Greenway, Sonoma Developmental Center and Petaluma River Park will all play critical roles in creating a healthier, more climate-resilient Sonoma County—and more equitable access to the benefits of nature.



Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway

www.southeastgreenway.org

2009 Southeast Greenway Campaign is formed
2019 City of Santa Rosa zones 47 acres for Greenway parkland

2021 City of Santa Rosa presents title reports and appraisal mapping to Caltrans, owner of the property
2022 City of Santa Rosa and Caltrans enter into purchase agreement

plan submitted to Petaluma Park Partners (PPP); approved by PPP board

2022 Petaluma River Park Foundation announces plan to make trail accessible in 2022

Sonoma Developmental Center

www.transformsdc.com

2018 SDC closed by state
2019 State forges unique partnership with Sonoma County to develop reuse plan
June 2022 County staff to publish draft environmental impact report and specific plan for public review

July & August 2022

- County planning commission to hold public hearings
- Scientific, legal and technical responses to the draft EIR

September 2022 Board of Supervisors to consider certifying the final environmental report and adopting the specific plan

Petaluma River Park

www.petalumariverpark.org

2019 Petaluma River Park Foundation founded and enters escrow to purchase McNear Peninsula
2020 Closes escrow
2021 Park boundaries expand to tip of McNear Peninsula
2021 Community Engagement Coalition formed to direct park planning process
2022 Community engagement



Santa Rosa Southeast Greenway



Petaluma River Park (rendering)



Sonoma Developmental Center



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CONSERVATION COUNCIL TEENS TACKLE WILDFIRE ECOLOGY



As the climate continues to grow warmer and drier and wildfire season expands each year, the urgency to foster wildfire resilience grows. Over the past few years, land management practices have focused on fire-fuel reduction, shaded fuel breaks and prescribed fire.

However, there is very little work published on the impacts of these wildfire treatments on the Sonoma County ecosystem, so Sonoma Land Trust is attempting to work out what's going on with the help of teens in its Conservation Council.

The Conservation Council program is a year-long youth development and conservation research program for underrepresented high school teens.

Conservation Council participants, or council members, worked together to identify, design and complete a research project, based at Laufenberg Ranch, in Knights Valley. In the fall, winter and spring of this year, they had a unique opportunity to study and document how forest treatments impact wildlife movement and biodiversity. While council members placed remote wildlife cameras throughout the preserve, our stewardship team implemented multiple forest treatments to increase fire resilience.

The Council has now recovered and categorized almost 10,000 images and videos documenting more than 20 species of fauna. Preliminary results show that, while most vegetation treatments are initially disruptive—they can be noisy—most animals are returning to the treated areas relatively quickly. We hope the results of our study will inform approaches to vegetation treatments that lessen disruption and accelerate recovery time. The results of the Council's study will be published in a scientific poster later this year.

The Land Trust's Conservation Council program uses the latest science and research in its work with teens. As the council members learn from our team of experts, we're reminded that we're learning from these apprentice environmentalists, too.