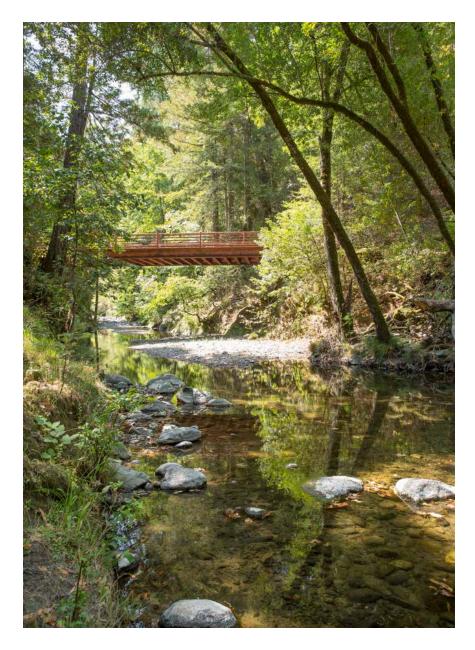


What is the Vital Lands Initiative?

The voters of Sonoma County envisioned a future where scenic open spaces sustain a thriving farm and ranch economy, clean drinking water, viable habitats and ecosystems for fish and wildlife, and healthy communities where people can access and enjoy the outdoors. Increasingly, the community understands the important role that working and natural lands play in sequestering carbon and avoiding greenhouse gas emissions, while making Sonoma County resilient to extreme events, such as fires, floods and drought, and the growing impacts of climate change. In support of the Sonoma County community's vision, the Vital Lands Initiative is a long-range comprehensive plan to prioritize the land conservation activities of Sonoma County Ag + Open Space through 2031. The plan was developed with the best available science and data, as well as extensive input from Ag + Open Space partners and the community, to ensure the document reflects the knowledge and expertise of stakeholders and the land conservation goals of Sonoma County voters. In total, over 150 meetings and workshops were held, during which Ag + Open Space received input from over 600 community members to inform the Vital Lands Initiative

The Vital Lands Initiative outlines five specific land conservation goals that are supported by objectives and mapped priorities. The plan also describes the processes and approaches that Ag + Open Space uses to identify conservation priorities and protect land in perpetuity, as well as strategies and tools used to achieve the Vital Lands Initiative goals.



About Ag + Open Space

AG + OPEN SPACE MISSION

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.

BACKGROUND

The 1989 General Plan called for the "establishment of an Open Space District...to acquire and administer open space lands." In 1990, faced with the conversion of working and natural lands on the edge of the rapidly urbanizing Bay Area, the visionary voters of Sonoma County approved Measures A and C to establish the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag + Open Space) and to collect a quarter-cent sales tax over a 20-year period to fund protection of agricultural lands and open space in

perpetuity. In 2006, voters extended the sales tax through 2031 by passing Measure F with an impressive 76% of the vote.

Both the 1989 Sonoma County General Plan and the updated Sonoma County General Plan 2020 (adopted in 2008) provide fundamental direction for Ag + Open Space in the Agricultural Resources Element, the Open Space and Resource Conservation Element, the Land Use Element, and the Water Resources Element. Provisions that guide Ag + Open Space work include the direction to preserve open space between and around cities, protect land currently in and potentially suitable for productive agriculture, protect natural resources, and provide outdoor recreation opportunities.







Since 1990, Ag + Open Space Has Protected...

Since its formation, Ag + Open Space has protected and continues to perpetually steward over 118,000 acres of high priority open space lands, preserving productive agricultural land and local food, healthy watersheds, functional ecosystems and biodiversity, scenic landscapes and greenbelts, and providing a wide variety of recreational opportunities for Sonoma County residents and visitors.

35,825 ACRES **OF LAND SUITABLE** FOR GRAZING

45 **NEW PARKS PRESERVES**

17 **MOUNTAINS** RIDGETOPS

PROPERTIES PRODUCING LOCAL CROPS, DAIRY PRODUCTS, & WINE

14,332 ACRES **OF REDWOOD FOREST**

EQUIVALENT TO 122,000 12% OF THE LAND IN **ACRES** SONOMA COUNTY

99 MILES **OF STREAMS THAT ARE HOME TO ENDANGERED SALMON & TROUT**

5.911 **ACRES OF WETLANDS** + **RIPARIAN HABITAT**

OVER 95 **MILES OF TRAILS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**

57% OF PROTECTED **PROPERTIES** WITHIN COMMUNITIES **OR SURROUNDING GREENBELT AREAS**

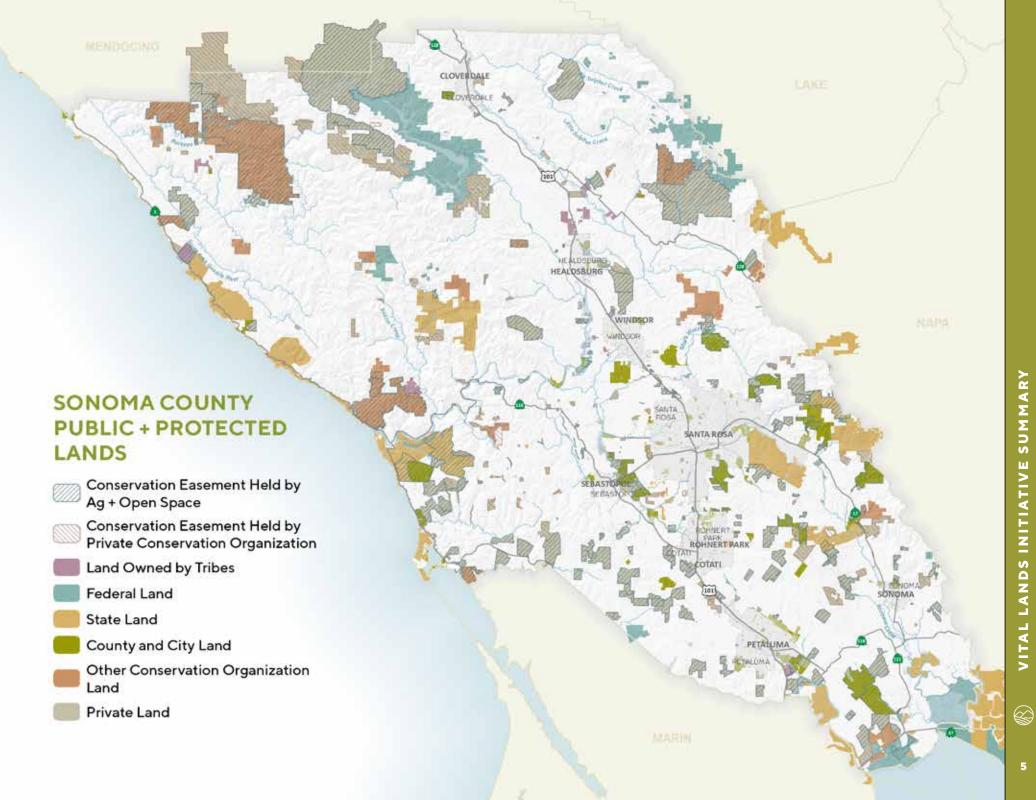
64,898 **ACRES OF NATIVE OAK WOODLAND** + FOREST

6 LOCATIONS PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE **RUSSIAN RIVER**

38 COMMUNITY **OPEN SPACE PROJECTS** IN CITIES + **UNINCORPORATED** COMMUNITIES

64,823 ACRES IN THE RUSSIAN RIVER WATERSHED. A CRITICAL DRINKING WATER SOURCE





Vital Lands Initiative Goals and Objectives

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.
- 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.

AGRICULTURAL LANDS:

Protect lands that support diverse, sustainable, and productive agriculture.

- Protect the highest priority grazing lands and croplands.
- Create a balanced portfolio of protected lands that represents the diverse types of agriculture in Sonoma County.
- Support access to land for farmers and ranchers.
- Prioritize the protection of land that has infrastructure and facilities for agricultural processing, when compatible with other agricultural objectives and Ag + Open Space conservation features.
- Support agricultural use on Ag + Open Space protected lands.
- Ensure that grazing is allowed for vegetation management and fire
 protection in projects under the Wildlands and Water goals where it is
 consistent with the protection of Wildlands and Water conservation
 features.
- Ensure that at least 50% of all future Ag + Open Space projects under the Community Identity goal include agricultural use.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY:

Protect open lands that surround and differentiate the county's urban areas and contribute to the unique scenic character of the county.

- Protect unique and scenic landscapes.
- Protect priority greenbelt areas an area of open land that surrounds a community.
- Protect lands that provide visual relief from urbanized areas and highly traveled roads, including the most visible ridgelines and mountaintops and valleys.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES:

Protect open space and publicly accessible lands in and near cities and communities and connect people with protected lands.

- Prioritize projects that increase passive or low-intensity recreational opportunities using easements and recreation covenants.
- Ensure that Ag + Open Space protected lands transferred to recreational partners are open to the public and continue to protect conservation features.
- Continue sustainable and climate friendly agriculture where appropriate on recreational lands
- Acquire and convey trail easements in areas where regional or local trails
 are officially identified by recreational partners, particularly when such
 areas can link to existing segments of trail.
- Partner to provide funding for a diverse portfolio of community open spaces, supporting the protection of conservation features and the connection of urbanized areas with natural and agricultural landscapes.
- Provide a high quality and culturally relevant education and outreach program to help the community make meaningful connections to the land.
- Partner with public agencies and non-profit organizations to ensure that all communities have open space to enjoy.
- Consider opportunities on future acquisitions that expand, create, or connect new parks and open space preserves, trails, or access points to identified water trails.
- Enhance connections between communities through open space investments.

WATER:

Protect natural lands and aquatic habitats that support water resources.

- Protect the highest priority riparian corridors and headwater streams.
- Protect the highest priority wetlands, including estuaries and marshes,
 vernal pools, and other freshwater wetlands.
- Protect the highest priority groundwater basins and recharge areas.
- Protect the highest priority aquatic habitats and associated upland areas that support rare, unique, or special-status aquatic plants or animals.
- Protect connected aquatic habitats and the lands that support this connectivity.

WILDLANDS:

Protect natural lands and terrestrial habitats that support plants, wildlife, and biodiversity.

- Protect the highest priority old-growth and mature hardwood and conifer forests.
- Protect the highest priority oak woodlands, shrublands, grassland and other non-woody vegetation.
- Protect rare, unique, or particularly diverse vegetation communities.
- Protect the highest priority habitats for rare, unique, or special-status terrestrial plants and animals.
- Protect lands critical for supporting high native biodiversity.
- Protect critical wildlife movement corridors and large intact habitat areas.









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Protection of Sonoma County working and natural lands results in the conservation of multiple values that are important to the long-term viability of ecosystems and human communities. Although the goals and recommended expenditures in the Vital Lands Initiative are focused on key thematic areas – including agricultural lands, community identity, wildlands, water, and healthy communities – almost all Ag + Open Space land conservation work achieves outcomes across all goal areas. For example, dairies protected by Ag + Open Space easements provide local food, jobs and economic revenue, yet they also protect wildlife

habitat and corridors, sustain groundwater and streams, and preserve family farms and the beautiful, rural nature of Sonoma County. Another example: Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve is a scenic greenbelt providing beautiful views of the Santa Rosa Plain, yet this 1,100-acre preserve also protects the water supply, provides habitat for an array of species, sequesters carbon, supports cattle grazing, and provides trails and recreational opportunities that are easily accessible from Santa Rosa.





Identifying and Protecting Conservation Priorities

Given the ambitious land conservation goals of the Vital Lands Initiative, and the limited time and money available to achieve them, it is imperative that Ag + Open Space continue to prioritize its work to achieve the intentions of the voters.

Conservation work begins with a robust data and analysis framework. Existing data is collected and evaluated, data gaps are identified and filled, and prioritization criteria are updated as new information becomes available. These data are used to create a ranked list of high-priority properties where conservation will provide the highest level of benefit, including benefits across multiple goal areas,

as well as carbon sequestration, resilience to climate change, floods, fire, drought, and sea level rise. Ag + Open Space only works with willing landowners identified either through proactive outreach or an application by the property owner.

Once high-priority properties with willing landowners are identified, Ag + Open Space establishes a conservation easement to permanently protect the identified conservation features and values. Long-term stewardship (including regular monitoring, easement violation response, review of permitted uses, and meeting with new landowners) protects investments made by taxpayers in perpetuity.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS: PREFERRED LAND CONSERVATION TOOL

The primary tool Ag + Open Space uses to meet the goals and objectives is the conservation easement. Conservation easements are legal agreements between a willing landowner and the agency that permanently limit uses of the land to protect its conservation values – specific agricultural, natural, scenic, or recreational attributes of the property that provide a public benefit. Conservation easements are a popular and highly effective tool for ensuring protection of a community's most important lands or open space through non-regulatory means. When landowners sell or donate a conservation easement to Ag + Open Space, they are transferring certain property rights (such as development rights) which they can then no longer use. As the landowners, they can still sell the property or pass it on to their heirs and they can continue to use and maintain their property consistent with the terms of the

conservation easement. The conservation easement is perpetual, so new owners will be subject to the same restrictions as their predecessors.

As the easement holder, Ag + Open Space is permanently obligated to ensure that the terms of the conservation easement are being honored, even when the land changes hands. The easement holder must visit (i.e. monitor) the property periodically, to ensure that the public's investment remains intact and the conservation features are still protected. Through the acquisition of an easement, public benefits such as clean air, clean water, natural beauty, and others are protected. However, the public receives these benefits for a fraction of the price of an outright purchase and long-term management of the land. An easement protects the public benefits while the land stays on the tax rolls and the landowner retains the ability to manage and steward their land.

Strategies

Given the tremendous amount of unprotected, high value land that exists in Sonoma County – more than could ever be protected with funds available through the Measure F sales tax measure – Ag + Open Space must be strategic and effective in protecting these lands. Following is a set of tools, approaches, and strategies that Ag + Open Space will use to implement the Vital Lands Initiative:

- Expand and improve land protection by reaching out proactively to landowners, focusing on the use of conservation easements to protect land, and exploring the use of innovative tools such as affirmative easements.
- Partner with others including land conservation partners, Tribal partners, cities and counties, and landowners to increase impact.
 Actively engage with underrepresented communities.
- Increase efficiency, effectiveness, and impact by leveraging local
 tax dollars through outside grants, transferring or selling all Ag + Open
 Space-owned properties, learning from land conservation peers and
 landowners, expanding resources for landowners (including new
 or beginning farmers and ranchers), and conducting regular selfevaluation and process improvements.
- Ensure science-based decision-making and integrate climate change and extreme event resiliency into all aspects of Ag + Open Space work.

Increase transparency and communication by sharing an annual work
plan and annual progress reports, educating the community about the
benefits of land conservation, developing opportunities for youth and
the public to connect with and learn from natural and working lands, and
preparing messaging materials about public access on protected lands.





Looking Forward

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space has made significant strides in accomplishing many of the land conservation goals envisioned by the Sonoma County community in 1990. This includes implementation of the open space elements of the General Plan and protection of over 118,000 acres of high priority agricultural and open space lands most threatened with loss or conversion, as well as major additions to the County's parks, trails and recreational areas.

The work of Ag + Open Space benefits human communities and ecosystems by protecting the lands that sustain local food supplies, provide clean and abundant water, promote biological diversity, and contribute to community health and well-being. The continued viability of working and natural lands is foundational to Sonoma County's goals for climate and extreme event resiliency.

The Vital Lands Initiative lays out an ambitious plan for the remainder of the current voter-approved funding measure – a plan that builds on thirty years of successful collaborative work with land conservation partners, relies on the best available science and data, and integrates diverse, substantial input

from an engaged and informed community. A compelling vision for land conservation, the Vital Lands Initiative outlines opportunities for expanding the impact of the community's investments by acting more proactively to protect threatened landscapes, and leveraging investments from partners within and outside of Sonoma County.

The success of Ag + Open Space relies on these partnerships, including agricultural organizations and landowners, Tribal groups, land trusts, non-profits, Sonoma County Regional Parks and other recreational partners, Sonoma Water and other water agencies, resource conservation districts, cities and business groups. Together, Ag + Open Space and its many partners have carried out the community's vision, yet there is so much more to be done to ensure that Sonoma County agricultural and open space lands continue to thrive, especially given the increasing threat of climate change.

With the Vital Lands Initiative as a guide, Ag + Open Space and its partners will continue to strive for a healthy, beautiful and climate resilient Sonoma County - today and for generations to come.







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