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## **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Jason Weller Visits Sonoma County after NRCS Invests \$8 Million in Local Land Conservation**

*Local agencies to demonstrate visionary 'Venture Conservation' model, outcomes*

**SANTA ROSA, CA (May 6, 2016)** – A regional collaboration of local resource agencies will host a special reception and field tour for the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) Chief Jason Weller and USDA-NRCS State Conservationist Carlos Suarez. The event will showcase the multi-partner collaboration and innovative approach to land conservation in the face of drought and climate change that netted the group \$8 million in federal funding. The reception and field tour is **Friday, May 6 from 12:00pm to 4:00pm**.

The prominent leaders have been invited by Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore and a consortium of 30 organizations who recently teamed up to apply for funds from the USDA-NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to combat the effects of climate change and drought through strategic conservation of agricultural lands and important ecosystems.

"In the face of historic drought and a shifting climate, we have to focus on resiliency in agricultural landscapes," said Chief Weller. "Though we can't create more water, we can be smarter and more efficient in how we use it. By working together, we can combine federal and state resources to achieve local solutions. Projects like this one in California will help local communities to be better prepared for drought and other extreme weather events."

### **Tour travels from Pepperwood Preserve to Laguna de Santa Rosa**

To demonstrate the impact the funding will have on the Sonoma County landscape, the reception and tour will kick off at Pepperwood Preserve where participants will be able to view the southern portion of the Russian River watershed and its major tributaries such as Mark West Creek and the Laguna de Santa Rosa. With the vast landscape below, local partners will speak of the significance of receiving this partnership and how the program will work to identify strategic properties for conservation and restoration.

Following a lunch reception, the tour will head to Beretta Dairy and the LaFranchi property in the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed. With the working dairy and farm as backdrops, the program partners will discuss options for using RCPP funding to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers, and begin working with landowners and Resource Conservation Districts to implement conservation and restoration plans on the ground. Focus areas for conservation include properties that have high priority groundwater basins, stream corridors and agricultural lands.

"We're thrilled to welcome Chief Weller and State Conservationist Suarez to Sonoma County," said Supervisor Gore. "The goal of Venture Conservation is about much more than a few projects; it is about creating a

collaborative platform to solve Sonoma County's core natural resource problems," Gore said. "This special visit is an indication of our visionary and ground-breaking approach to land conservation, climate change resilience, and protecting what we all love about our beautiful county."

### **Sonoma County Venture Conservation Program to address drought, climate change**

Severe drought in California has had dramatic effects on our critically important agricultural lands and ecosystems. Protection of these areas for climate resiliency and drought mitigation is a high priority for many agencies in Sonoma County. The **Sonoma County Venture Conservation Program** features a strong and diverse partnership of 30 committed entities engaged in a shared vision to ensure economic, agricultural and environmental health through strategic land conservation initiatives.

Led by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District with support from core team partners of Sonoma Resource Conservation District, Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, Sonoma County Water Agency and Pepperwood Dwight Center for Conservation Science, the partnership will leverage local knowledge, funding, and resources with federal USDA-NRCS dollars through a 'venture conservation' approach whereby the federal funding will act as seed money that will be matched two-to-one at the local level. This partnership allows for work across boundaries in a cooperative, pro-active, and integrative way to conserve key pieces of land that will result in substantive improvements in Russian River water quality, groundwater levels, wildlife habitat and flows in key creeks and streams.

### **Partnership envisions agriculture and natural resource protection together**

The goals of the partnership recognize both the value of farming to Sonoma's economy and way of life, as well as the need and ability for farming and natural resource protection to go hand in hand. The majority of the funding will be used to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers on agricultural land along stream corridors, in areas that allow water to recharge groundwater basins and that are important fish and wildlife habitat. These areas are foundational to Sonoma County agriculture and will help farmers and the environment to withstand the threat of droughts and climate change. They also contain prime agricultural soils and world-class agriculture that are increasingly encroached upon by residential and commercial development given the proximity to the rapidly urbanizing Bay Area.

"Agriculture and resource protection along tributaries of the Russian River are critical and compatible goals," said USDA-NRCS State Conservationist Carlos Suarez. "It is a privilege to work alongside such a robust partnership to contribute to that vision."

Nearly forty percent of the funding will go to supporting on-the-ground conservation work on land covered by or adjacent to the easements needed to realize the goals of water quality, water supply and habitat. The conservation planning and design for this work will come from the large collaborative coalition of partners. Financial support for the needed conservation practices will come through USDA-NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which will dedicate a specific allocation of EQIP funds to the Sonoma County Venture Conservation Program as a result of the RCPP funding.

"Conserving open space agricultural land is not only essential for preserving Sonoma County's unique rural character and beauty, but it is also key in providing resiliency in the future, when droughts and floods are likely to be more frequent and severe. This partnership will focus on protecting and enhancing those lands that provide groundwater recharge and that are key to abundant stream flows," said Gore.

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