



Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District

R-26-20
Meeting 26-06
February 25, 2026

SPECIAL MEETING AGENDA ITEM 1

AGENDA ITEM

Conservation Grazing Vegetation Management and Brush Reduction Program

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATION

Receive an informational report on vegetation management and brush reduction in grazing units conducted between 2024 and 2026 (and planned in 2027) in support of the Conservation Grazing Program. No Board Action required.

SUMMARY

Since the fall of 2024, the Conservation Grazing Program has utilized contractor and rancher support to mow and spot spray brush in twelve (12) Grazing Units. By the end of 2027, a total of 801 acres will have been mowed and treated, representing approximately 8.4% of available grazing lands on Grazing Units¹ across Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) lands.

DISCUSSION

Vegetation management, specifically the reduction of brush in grasslands within coastal San Mateo County, is an essential District land management function. The purpose of this work is to provide ecologically sensitive brush reduction within all twelve (12) of the District's Grazing Units in various preserves. The work is vital in protecting the unique biodiversity of grasslands, supporting and sustaining local agricultural communities and the agricultural heritage, and is also a way to accomplish fuel management goals on the landscape to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

Completed Work 2024-2026

Vegetation management work completed between 2024 and 2026 includes mechanical brush removal and limited pesticide use (e.g., spot-spraying brush re-growth) to expand coastal grasslands and improve forage resources in support of the Conservation Grazing Program. Most of the work was completed using a Board-approved contract with Ecological Concerns, Inc. (ECI). Additional brush mowing was also completed by contracting directly with District grazing tenants (ranchers) who have equipment and expertise to assist with mowing.

¹ According to best available mapping data, total area under lease to District grazing tenants is approximately 15,496 acres. Of those acres, the District identifies 9,459 acres as "Grazing Pastures." This lower figure only includes grassland where cattle actively graze and peripheral shrubland and woodland areas adjacent to grasslands where cattle are known to have access. To understand the percentage of grasslands that have the potential for brush encroachment that were treated as part of this project, District staff divided total acres treated by the "Grazing Pastures" figure.

The work performed was identified with close collaboration from Natural Resources Department (NR) staff and ranchers to ensure alignment between annual ecological and agricultural goals. Staff utilized on-site surveys, vegetation maps, Rangeland Management Plans, Rangeland Monitoring Reports, and the Brush Management Plan to develop prospective treatment locations. Once the prospective treatment locations were identified, NR and Facilities and Fleet Department (F&F) staff met with ranchers to compare the proposed locations with their views of brush encroachment needs to support their operation, and to evaluate how ranchers could collaborate to improve program outcomes.

In 2024-2025, the first year of work, the program leveraged areas on Grazing Units that had been previously mowed by ranchers to allow for first-year spot spraying through the existing multi-year contract with ECI. A summary table of mowed and spot-sprayed acres from Year One is included below.

| Grazing Unit Treated | Acres Mowed | Acres Spot-Sprayed |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Contractor Work Plan | | |
| Blue Brush Canyon Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve</i> | 21 | |
| Elkus/Lobitos/South Cowell Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve</i> | 48 | |
| Johnston Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | 26 | |
| Butano Farms Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | 35 | |
| Cloverdale Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | | 73 |
| Johnston Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | | 35 |
| Toto Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 63 |
| Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 35 |
| Subtotal | 130 | 206 |
| Rancher Work Plan | | |
| Cloverdale Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | 38 | |
| Harrington Grazing Unit (Sears Ranch) <i>La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 109 | |
| Toto Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 115 | |
| October Farms Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve</i> | 30 | |
| Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 27 | |
| Subtotal | 319 | 0 |
| Grand total | 449 | 206* |

*Actual number of acres that receive herbicide treatment is significantly lower. Brush species are dispersed throughout total area, typically in low percentages. Percent cover of brush species at each site vary from 5-75%.

In the second year of work, 2025-2026, the program included the following:

| Grazing Unit Treated | Acres Mowed | Acres Spot-Sprayed |
|--|-------------|--------------------|
| Contractor Work Plan | | |
| Mindego Grazing Unit <i>Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | 36 | |
| Big Dipper Grazing Unit <i>Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | 5 | |
| Gordon Ridge Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 20 | |
| Elkus/Lobitos/South Cowell Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 34 | |
| Butano Farms Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | 48 | |
| Lone Madrone Grazing Unit <i>La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 26 | |
| Bluebrush Canyon Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 20 |
| Elkus/Lobitos/South Cowell Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 48 |
| Butano Farms Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | | 27 |
| Johnston Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | | 35 |
| Toto Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 70 |
| Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 27 |
| Harrington Grazing Unit <i>La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 28 |
| Subtotal | 169 | 255 |
| Rancher Work Plan | | |
| Harrington Grazing Unit (Folger Ranch) <i>La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 54 | |
| Toto Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 96 | |
| Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | 48 | |
| October Farms Grazing Unit* <i>Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve</i> | 10 | |
| Lobitos Grazing Unit* <i>Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve</i> | 29 | |
| Subtotal | 237 | |
| Grand total | 406 | 255 |

*Proposed for Winter/Spring 2026; work not yet complete as of February 2026.

The upcoming work plan proposed for the July 1, 2026 - June 30, 2027 timeframe is provided below:

| Grazing Unit Treated | Acres Mowed | Acres Spot-Sprayed |
|--|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Contractor Work Plan | | |
| Bluebrush Canyon Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 20 |
| Mindego Grazing Unit <i>Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | | 36 |
| Big Dipper Grazing Unit <i>Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve</i> | | 5 |
| Gordon Ridge Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 22 |
| Elkus/Lobitos/South Cowell Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 34 |
| Butano Farms Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | | 48 |
| Lone Madrone Grazing Unit <i>La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 25 |
| Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 41 |
| October Farms Grazing Unit <i>Purisima Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 30 |
| Toto Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve</i> | | 41 |
| Cloverdale Ranch Grazing Unit <i>Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve</i> | | 38 |
| Subtotal | | 340 |
| Rancher Work Plan | | |
| <i>Brush mow sites not yet identified</i> | 208 | |
| Subtotal | 208 | |
| Grand Total | 208 | 340 |

Below is a summary table with the total treatment acreages anticipated for the completed work plan spanning from 2024 through 2027.

| Year | Acres Mowed | Acres Spot-Sprayed |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 2024-2025 | 449 | 206 |
| 2025-2026 | 406 | 255 |
| 2026-2027 (Proposed) | 208 | 340 |
| Total acres treated with mowing and spot-spraying | | 801* |

*Represents approximately 8.4% of the active grazing acreage.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The success of this work has relied upon close collaboration between Conservation Grazing program staff in F&F, staff from the wildlife and vegetation programs in NR, our District contractor—ECI, and from District ranching partners on the coast. The increased pace and scale of brush treatment was new for the District and, overall, these efforts have been very successful. Staff has observed positive responses in numerous native grassland plant species, improved access to forage for livestock in the conservation grazing program, and use of recently treated areas by native grassland wildlife.

After two years, District staff has refined the workflow for identifying and reviewing potential treatment areas, arranging and contracting for treatment with either ECI or District ranchers, coordinating actual implementation on the ground, mitigating interruptions to grazing operations, and reporting completed work through our Integrated Pest Management Program. Inevitably, however, there have been challenges and complications. For example, work windows are narrow for both mowing and spraying to avoid nesting bird season, to avoid mowing as much as possible during fire season, and to avoid rain in the fall that compromise ground conditions. Many of these treatment sites are remote, which complicates mobilization for crews and slows work progress. And identifying and designing treatment areas is also a challenge, balancing rancher preferences, terrain and topography, and rare or invasive plant constraints with District goals.

Additionally, staff had anticipated the need to address potential secondary invaders in areas where brush work was carried out. Non-native invasive species such as poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) and various thistles (i.e. *Cirsium vulgare* and *Carduus pycnocephalus*) among others may have responded positively to brush work if propagules were present or nearby. Based on observations and experience from the current contract, future efforts may include greater emphasis on reducing non-native invasive species invasion.

Herbicide applications also introduce additional logistical and compliance complexity, including site-specific suitability determinations, proximity to aquatic resources, and adherence to regulatory limitations. In portions of the project area, restrictions associated with California red-legged frog constrain the products and methods available, which can necessitate alternative approaches or additional coordination and timing considerations.

After the 2026-2027 work year, the District has the option to execute one more year on the brush management contract with ECI. There is strong interest from District staff and from ranchers in continuing this work for that final year of the contract, and beyond. The District is engaging in brush management at a scale that is meaningful; and the work has clear overlapping benefits to both natural resource management and agricultural practice.

In the future, to help evaluate whether current brush management is keeping pace with natural regrowth, the District is partnering with UC Santa Cruz to establish long-term monitoring plots designed to quantify the rate of coyote brush encroachment in coastal grasslands. These plots will provide repeatable, on-the-ground measurements of brush expansion and treatment response over time, allowing staff to compare observed encroachment rates against the acreage and frequency of District brush reduction efforts. The goal is to answer a core management question: in the absence of the historic processes that once limited shrub expansion, especially frequent fire, are current treatment levels sufficient to offset ongoing coyote brush encroachment and sustain desired coastal grassland conditions, or do we need to adjust the intensity, timing, or interval of treatments.

FISCAL IMPACT

None

PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW

- **March 25, 2008:** Amendment of the Preliminary Use and Management Plans for Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserve; Incorporation of a Grazing Management Plan, Approval of a Categorical Exemption and Grazing Lease for Tunitas Creek Grazing Unit ([R-08-40, meeting minutes](#))
- **November 10, 2010:** Amendment of a Preliminary Use and Management Plans for Lobitos Ridge/Elkus Ranch Uplands; Incorporation of a Rangeland Management Plan, Approval of a Negative Declaration and Grazing Lease for Lobitos Ridge/Elkus Uplands ([R-10-99, meeting minutes](#))
- **August 22, 2012:** Authorization to Amend the Preliminary Use and Management Plan for Bluebrush Canyon Addition to the Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve to Incorporate a Rangeland Management Plan for the Bluebrush Canyon Grazing Unit, and Authorization to Approve a Grazing Lease for the Bluebrush Canyon Grazing Unit. ([R-12-80, meeting minutes](#)).
- **February 26, 2020:** Amendment of a Preliminary Use and Management Plans for Toto Ranch; Incorporation of a Rangeland Management Plan, Approval of a Negative Declaration and Grazing Lease for Toto Ranch ([R-20-09, meeting minutes](#))
- **November 10, 2021:** Adoption of a Preliminary Use and Management Plan for Johnston Ranch Uplands; Authorization to enter into a Lease and Management Agreement with POST and Assignment of Grazing Lease; and Determination that these actions are Categorically Exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act; ([R-21-132, meeting minutes](#))
- **December 10, 2022:** Proposed phased purchase of the Peninsula Open Space Trust - Cloverdale Ranch Uplands properties, located along Cloverdale, Gazos Creek, Bean Hollow and Pescadero Roads and the Cabrillo Highway, in unincorporated San Mateo County, to create Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve. ([R-22-140, meeting minutes](#))
- **August 28, 2024:** Award of contract to Ecological Concerns, Inc., for 2024 Conservation Grazing Vegetation Management and Brush Reduction ([R-24-110, meeting minutes](#))

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act. A notice of this agenda item was also provided to the San Mateo County Farm Bureau and to current grazing tenants.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

Pursuant to Section 15168 of the CEQA Guidelines, the District has determined that the vegetation management and brush reduction activities as contemplated herein are within the

scope of the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Program, adopted by Board Resolution No. 14-37 on December 10, 2014.

NEXT STEPS

The District will continue to evaluate contractor and rancher performance each year and consider whether to extend the contract annually for an additional two years. Monitoring effort will continue per the IPM Program, providing data for adaptive management actions to ensure the least impact to natural resources while maximizing the benefits.

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