Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Memorandum

DATE: August 25, 2021

MEMO TO: Board of Directors

THROUGH: Ana Ruiz, General Manager

FROM: David Liefert, Water Resources Specialist

SUBJECT: Water Quality Improvement Plan to Address Sediment Impairment in the San Gregorio Creek Watershed

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SUMMARY

The San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board (Water Board) will consider adopting the San Gregorio Creek Water Quality Improvement Plan (WQIP) in October 2021. The WQIP is similar to the Pescadero-Butano Watershed Sediment Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) approved by the Water Board in May 2019 and aims to restore critical coho salmon and steelhead habitat in the San Gregorio Watershed by reducing excessive levels of erosion and sediment. The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) has addressed sedimentation in both watersheds (e.g., through the Watershed Protection Plan in El Corte de Madera Open Space Preserve), but some critical sites remain. Both the Pescadero-Butano TMDL and the San Gregorio WQIP direct landowners to identify and address high-priority sediment sources in the San Gregorio and Pescadero-Butano Watersheds. The Fiscal Year 2021-22 (FY22) budget includes $100,000 to analyze future sediment-reducing actions to comply with both the San Gregorio WQIP and Pescadero-Butano TMDL over their 20-year expected duration.

BACKGROUND

San Gregorio Creek was first listed as a sediment-impaired waterbody in 1998 under the Federal Clean Water Act. As steelhead and coho populations declined regionally and sedimentation issues in San Gregorio Creek continued, the Water Board began to consider actions to improve habitat for aquatic species affected by water quality. Landslides and steep topography create a naturally high rate of sedimentation in the watershed, but historical land uses, such as logging, also contribute to sediment loads. The Water Board identified numerous activities or legacy impacts from previous land uses that discharge sediment at unnaturally high rates today.

The Water Board selected an alternative nonregulatory approach of a WQIP, compared to the typical regulatory approach of a TMDL, to improve water quality because landowners, including the District, have already undertaken measures to reduce sediment discharges to streams (e.g., through the Watershed Protection Plan in El Corte de Madera Creek Open Space Preserve). Such measures include limiting erosion from livestock grazing, addressing erosion on active and abandoned roads, and restoring streams. By curtailing anthropogenic (human-caused) sediment loads and enhancing stream-riparian habitat, the Water Board aims to conserve and augment steelhead trout populations; restore an annual spawning run of coho salmon; protect and enhance

habitat for native aquatic species; and protect and enhance the aesthetic and recreational values of the creek and its tributaries.

DISCUSSION

If approved this fall, the San Gregorio WQIP will call for continued or expanded ***voluntary*** measures over the next 20 years to reduce anthropogenic sources of sediment rather than regulatory (and mandatory) actions. An updated road and trail inventory will help the District determine what work remains in the San Gregorio Watershed and identify high-priority sites in the Pescadero-Butano Watershed on lands acquired since the last assessment was performed in 2005. Despite the different regulatory approaches for each watershed, the Water Board calls for similar sediment-reducing actions to comply with both the WQIP and TMDL. Compliance with both water-quality plans can be best accomplished with a single inventory to prioritize sediment-reducing actions that can be gradually implemented over the next two decades.

Routine maintenance and best management practices have provided a substantial head start in reducing sediment delivered to San Gregorio Creek. This success partially motivated the Water Board's approach to address sediment impairment through voluntary actions. The District currently owns nearly 40% of the 33,000-acre San Gregorio Creek Watershed with about 12,900 acres of land in fee and another 350 acres under easement (future land purchases by the District within the Watershed would also be affected by the WQIP). Most sites of concern in El Corte de Madera Open Space Preserve, and many others in La Honda Creek, Russian Ridge, and the small portion of Tunitas Creek Open Space Preserves that drain to San Gregorio Creek, have been identified and addressed by installing erosion-control treatments and replacing culverts. The District reduced sediment in the Pescadero-Butano Watershed by implementing repairs recommended in a 2005 road and trail assessment that identified sediment sources in Skyline Ridge and Long Ridge Open Space Preserves.

NEXT STEPS

A single inventory that analyzes all sediment sources for both the San Gregorio and Pescadero-Butano Watersheds will help update and consolidate previous assessments and incorporate recently acquired lands. The sediment inventory will identify and prioritize future work and associated implementation costs, which will likely exceed $1,000,000 in each of the San Gregorio and Pescadero-Butano Watersheds. The costs will vary based on the number and scale of the high-priority projects, and their implementation can occur in phases over many years. Identifying project sites early in the Water Board's implementation of the WQIP in San Gregorio may help the District seek grant funding to complete sediment reduction projects.