



STEWARDS OF THE LAND

PHOTO BY HANNAH WILTON

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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Neighbor,

The year 2021 marked Gold Ridge RCD’s 80th anniversary serving west Sonoma County in its desire to improve the environment for current and future inhabitants. We are proud of the relationships we’ve built over these decades that have allowed us to be helpers in protecting our soil, water, wildlife, and agricultural resources. As we are all pushed to do more with less, we have leaned into our relationships to find inspiration, models of efficiency and innovation. In my experience, I’ve found that the biggest impact comes from collaborative projects—the ones that we dream up, work hard on, and celebrate together.

Within our RCD staff and board, we have expanded our capacity to serve the community by adding early career opportunities by partnering with AmeriCorps programs to build fellowship positions. We’ve also added three new Board Members and one new Associate Board Member, expanding our expertise and perspectives. We have put our

heads and hearts together with our neighboring RCDs to learn from the best each of us have to offer and pool our resources to improve our programs, technical skills, and ability to communicate effectively.

The past few years, we have built deeper alliances with other agencies, community groups and organizations to expand and improve our offerings. We hope through reading this newsletter, you’ll get to see the good work we’ve been able to achieve through these partnerships. For allowing us the opportunity to work alongside you, I’d like to beam out my most sincere appreciation to everyone who has offered or asked for help as we work together to leave behind this place we love, better than we found it.

Warmly and with gratitude,

Brittany Jensen
Brittany Jensen



You can read this newsletter in Spanish!
¡Puedes leer este boletín en español!
<https://tinyurl.com/BoletinEnEspanol>

2021–2022 FINANCIAL REPORT

LAST YEAR'S BUDGET WAS JUST OVER \$2.7 MILLION.

OUR WORK IS FUNDED THROUGH:

23%	Federal grants
48%	State grants
8%	Local contracts
3%	Fee-for-service
4%	Foundations
0.23%	Donations
1%	Property taxes
12%	Miscellaneous

TOTAL EXPENSES 2021-2022 FISCAL YEAR: \$2,735,945

40%	Streamflow Enhancement & Water Conservation
15%	Wildlife Habitat Enhancement
14%	Organizational Sustainability
6%	Climate Resiliency & Carbon Farming
6%	Fire & Forestry Management
5%	LandSmart Planning
5%	Environmental Regulation Compliance Assistance
5%	Science, Monitoring & Planning
3%	Community Outreach & Education
2%	Clean Water

RCDS AND YOU — EIGHT WAYS RCDS BENEFIT THE PUBLIC

Adapted from the Resource Conservation Network

1. **Support our farmers, ranchers, landowners, and land managers** in taking care of our watersheds. RCDS implement science-backed solutions to care for this shared resource.
2. **Support carbon farming design and implementation** to enable agricultural lands to be an essential contributor to climate change mitigation.
3. **Provide educational forums** for land managers, K-12 and college students, and the broader community to learn about and discuss the conservation of natural resources.
4. **Conserve clean, abundant water** for all creatures by improving water quality and conserving streamflow and groundwater.
5. **Engage and educate youth** through early career opportunities and educational programs.
6. **Build wildfire resiliency** by offering wildfire preparedness, resilience and recovery support to landowners and communities.
7. **Encourage biodiverse and resilient landscaping** that filters rainwater and supports beneficial insects and wildlife around our homes and schools.
8. **Bring technical and financial resources to land managers** to enhance creeks and rivers, wildlife corridors and the abundance of pollinator species by planting native habitats such as woodlands and hedgerows.

For information on our mission, vision, priorities, major strategies and objectives view our Strategic Plan: tinyurl.com/GRRCD-Strategy





PHOTO BY HANNAH WILTON

COMMUNITY GRAZING FIGHTS FIRE WITH GOATS AND SHEEP

Wildfire resilience requires an intentional shift toward community adaptation, given the inevitability of wildfires, resource constraints, and the need to protect the environment. There are various efforts underway in Sonoma County for fuels reduction through vegetation management that reduce fire hazard, improve defensible space, and increase forest resilience. Targeted grazing (also called prescribed grazing) is one tool for vegetation management.

Grazing comes with additional benefits: low impacts to air quality and noise; ease of access near structures and on steep slopes; natural fertilization; and if timed right, control of noxious weeds. Grazing can also be the most financially accessible and easiest to implement due to lack of permit requirements compared to other fuel treatments such as hand crews, mowing, masticating or prescribed burns.

Rural grass, shrub or forestland properties at risk of fire are a perfect match for the region's graziers who have hungry livestock seeking new pasture to graze. Connecting

graziers with at risk communities is the focus of the Sonoma County RCDs' new incentive program LandSmart Grazing for Community Resilience, funded through a \$184,600 grant from Ag + Open Space's Vegetation Management Program and in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension's Match.Graze—a free online tool that connects contract graziers to landowners throughout California.

The pilot program launched last year and funded six community grazing projects countywide. In Occidental, one of those projects brought a flock of fifty-four sheep and twelve goats to graze twenty-six contiguous acres across three neighboring properties: Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, Two Sisters Place and Mighty Arrow Ranch. The landowners said their goals for participating were primarily to mitigate wildfire risk, but also to restore the area's degraded coastal prairie. By working together, the project had a larger landscape effect and gave the neighbors practice in planning and implementing a cross-property conservation project, something they'd like to do again, now

We are motivated by the impact we see on the land and on new, small businesses like Charlotte's:

"Dear Gold Ridge RCD, Thank you so much for the \$1,000 grant. It makes a huge difference to this small new business. I jumped into goat grazing with both feet and have been paddling hard. Your grant gave me the buoyancy when I needed it."

—Charlotte Williams of Charlotte's Goats vs Fire



that the logistics and infrastructure have been worked out.

The landowners collaborated with local grazer John O'Mara, who brought his flock off of the Bodega Pastures property in nearby Bodega for the first time to participate in community grazing. John was excited to contribute his expertise and animals to this community resilience project: "In between the meetings leading up to the job, between the moments of pounding in the electric fence, there is a deep palpable feeling of goodness. When many species come together for the good of the commons, it is a moment of wonderment and kinship."

Together, the landowners, grazer and RCD mapped out the forage, fence-line, water resources, predator protection, and transportation necessary to keep the herd safe and healthy during their stay. After seventeen days, the result was twenty-six grazed acres of forest-lined coastal prairie. Low hanging tree branches were pruned up by browsing goats. Prairie grasses and forbes were clipped and stomped close to the ground by sheep. This management increases the open space between the ground and the canopy, which can help prevent ground fires from leaping into the treetops, as well as slow the accumulation of flammable vegetation. In addition, the herd transformed the consumed vegetation into nearly 200 pounds per day of nutrient-rich manure, which stimulates the prairie's carbon cycle.

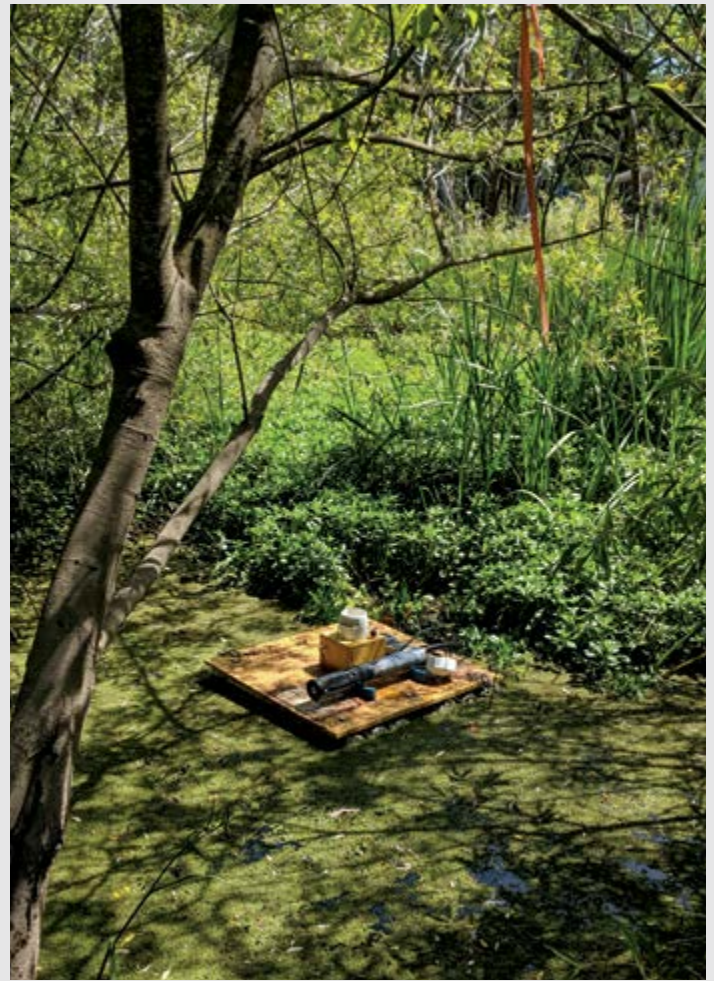
The Sonoma County RCDs are proud to support our community through the LandSmart Grazing program, and we look forward to continuing the program in the new year.

"Ultimately, we are all excited to have participated in the first year of this new public program and super grateful to the Gold Ridge and Sonoma RCDs for creating accessible options for land owners and managers to reweave animals and the time-honored art of grazing back into more fire resilient landscapes. As Christopher Szecsey of Two Sisters Place shared, we have to get out of the fragmented mindset of 'saving' singular properties from wildfire and move towards a more collaborative model of stewardship at a landscape scale. Beyond that, this project presented an exciting opportunity to work together as neighbors and not just 'think like a watershed' but a 'fibershed', in which we can create mutually beneficial, life-sustaining systems that support the people, the land, and our regional economy of local graziers and ranches."

—OAEC News, September 2022

Read the full story from OAEC here:

tinyurl.com/OAECgrazing



THE ATASCADERO CREEK SUBWATERSHED IS A GEM FOR WILDLIFE

The Atascadero Creek Subwatershed has been the subject of a recent coho salmon recovery study. Flowing from the coastal hills west of Sebastopol north through Graton, where it meets Green Valley Creek and flows through Forestville to the Russian River, locals may recognize Atascadero Creek as the one they cross each time they drive Bodega Highway, the creek that runs through Ragle Ranch Regional Park, and meanders beside the Joe Rodota trail in Graton. The creek habitat ranges from a shady, rock-lined channel with deep pools, to a wide and shallow perennial marsh. This incredibly diverse and unique body of water has presented local and state ecologists with questions: How does this natural system work? What wildlife utilize it? Are there

things we can do to improve its habitat value?

Questions about the Atascadero sparked when the Gold Ridge RCD, the California Sea Grant, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife began discussing the possibility that the cool, deep pools of the upper reaches of the Atascadero watershed in Jonive and Redwood Creeks may present high quality habitat for the endangered coho salmon. This hadn't been considered before, because just a few miles downstream, the Atascadero Marsh appeared to be an impenetrable fish trap: In dry years, surface water levels appeared too low for passage, and in flooding years, the marsh would fill with sediment, and water would fan out across roads and vineyards, stranding fish on land

Read the Atascadero Subwatershed Coho Habitat Assessment Report at:
www.goldridgecd.org/htm/atascadero_study.htm

when floodwaters receded. But just how impenetrable was the marsh, and what other habitat values might it provide to local wildlife?

After four years of research, it is clear that the diverse habitats of the Atascadero Creek Subwatershed are a gem for local wildlife. Young coho salmon, introduced through the Russian River Coho Salmon Captive Broodstock Program, are spending extended periods of time in the upper reach's excellent riparian habitat, and in the marsh below a wide variety of birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals—such as otters, turtles, ducks, and herons—thrive in the dense wetland ecosystem. It's also clear that the water body is providing significant ecosystem services to our community. Gold Ridge RCD ecologist Sierra Cantor calls the Atascadero Creek Subwatershed “a lush mosaic of habitat” that, because of its boggy and tangled environment, is “favored by a rich diversity of species,” and provides “an array of ecosystem services to the Atascadero-Green Valley and greater Russian River watershed.”

However, this incredibly rich system can't sustain endangered coho salmon in its current state. The research team found significant barriers to coho passage and survival in the lower reaches that challenge adult salmon accessing the headwater spawning sites as well as juvenile salmon on their outward migration. These barriers include physical, habitat, and water quality barriers and appear as sediment accumulation areas that clog the channel, low dissolved oxygen levels associated with the enclosed perennial marsh habitat, and disconnected stream channels. It's not just barriers that could threaten migratory fish. If demand on surface and groundwater increases near the creek, surface water flow could diminish, causing those deep, cold pools so favorable to salmon and other aquatic life to disappear.

Thanks to a strong partnership with local landowners, hydrologists, biologists, historians, and the greater scientific community, the Gold Ridge RCD and members of the research team have produced a detailed assessment of the habitat for coho salmon in the Atascadero. The report includes management recommendations specific to the different creeks and reaches. It also highlights areas for further research.

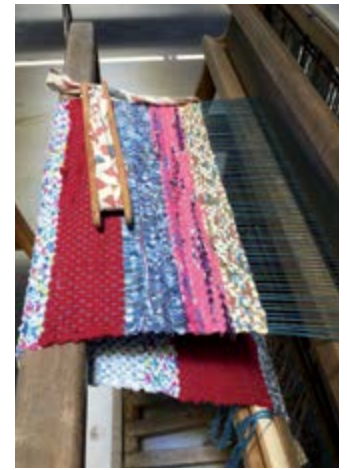
Facing left: Redwood Creek is a headwater tributary to the Atascadero Creek subwatershed. Facing right: Atascadero Marsh hosts abundant wildlife in the lower reach of the Atascadero Creek Subwatershed. Above: Environmental scientist Ben White, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, releases juvenile broodstock coho salmon into Redwood Creek.



Following the assessment's most actionable recommendations, the RCD has funded four key projects:

1. The removal of berms surrounding a 20-acre enclosed wetland area to reconnect the Atascadero Creek floodplain
2. An investigation of the sediment accumulation area and potential water quality impairments in the lower Atascadero stream channel
3. A Hydrologic Reconnection and Habitat Enhancement Master Plan to improve streamflow, fish passage, and water quality conditions through the reach of Atascadero Creek between Occidental and Green Valley Roads
4. Promotion of water conservation and alternative water sourcing in the upper tributaries of the Atascadero Creek watershed, Redwood, Jonive, and Sexton Creeks

There's still more to learn. However, these initial findings are already informing our partners about the conservation value of the Atascadero. Sonoma Land Trust will be referring to this plan as they update their strategy for conserving riparian areas throughout the county, and the CDFW will use this plan to help prioritize their restoration efforts throughout the Green Valley-Atascadero watershed. Residents who are interested in partnering on habitat restoration efforts in the watershed can contact RCD ecologist Sierra Cantor at sierra@goldridgercd.org.



STUDENTS EXPLORE THE BOUNTY OF DUCKWORTH FAMILY FARM

Duckworth Family Farm is the newest site in the suite of TEAM environmental education program farm sites across Sonoma County. TEAM stands for Teaching Environmental and Agricultural Memories, and its mission is to give elementary students a positive and lasting experience on a protected Sonoma County farm. This unique program is offered in partnership with Sonoma County Ag + Open Space.

Lorri Duckworth and her family are passionate about connecting children with real food. That’s why they open their organic blueberry and sheep farm in southern Sebastopol in the summertime to local families to experience picking blueberries straight off the bush. It is also why Lorri has partnered with the Sonoma County RCDs to offer a rich educational field trip to local youth.

This spring, 125 students explored the farm via three guided learning stations led by RCD staff and education consultant Stephanie Lennox of Envirichment. First, they toured the farm with binoculars to identify wildlife and farm features in the landscape. Then, they examined various natural fibers (including sheep’s wool) and wove rag rugs on antique looms. Lastly, they investigated and drew the

structures and functions of blueberry plants. For some students, this was their first time seeing how blueberries grow and learning how natural fibers are woven into fabric. At the end of each trip, Lorri Duckworth and her family served up a homemade sweet treat of blueberry ice cream, which was a welcome surprise for our students!

Through this field trip, the students develop an understanding of a multifaceted and interconnected farm system: Spring-fed ponds provide water for the sheep and blueberry crop and serve as habitat for wildlife like herons and otters. The sheep graze the fields and grow soft wool that will be used for clothing. Blueberry bushes are grown in the wet soil and produce sweet berries that the community will harvest in the summer. Under a conservation easement, the Duckworth Family has protected the farm and its surrounding wildlands from ever being developed out of agriculture. In this way, Duckworth Family Farm preserves the land’s natural abundance while cultivating community and food.

Learn more about Duckworth Family Farm at www.duckworthfarmblueberries.com



HWY 1 GLEASON BEACH ROADWAY REALIGNMENT MITIGATION & SCOTTY CREEK RESTORATION PROJECT

The coastal bluffs at Gleason Beach, north of Bodega Bay, have been eroding rapidly. A number of homes on the ocean side of Highway 1 have been demolished as the bluffs retreated, and recently a section of the highway was undermined, resulting in an emergency project by Caltrans, the state highway agency, to protect the road. Caltrans is now building a long-term solution to protect Highway 1 in this area—the relocation of the road up to 200 feet inland and construction of a new bridge over Scotty Creek, which flows into the Pacific at Gleason Beach. The new, 900-foot-long bridge will span the entire valley of Scotty Creek about 30 feet higher than the existing road. Construction of the new road and bridge started in the fall of 2021, and Caltrans hopes to open it in early 2023.

As is the case with most large infrastructure projects, building the new Highway 1 roadway and bridge at Gleason Beach will result in impacts to a variety of natural features and habitats, some of them very sensitive. Caltrans is required to mitigate the project's impacts to coastal terrace prairie and wetlands. Mitigation will include the enhancement of existing



PASSIONATE ADVOCATES: THE BALLARDS

The Ballards have been passionate advocates for restoring Scotty Creek and are the driving force behind the inclusion of extensive creek restoration in the suite of mitigation projects. The restoration of both riparian and instream habitat will fulfill a long-term conservation goal for their property. They see the establishment of both the conservation easement and rotational grazing regime as an opportunity to showcase conservation grazing practices, and hope their ranch becomes a model for sustainable ranching.

Left: Landowners Roberta and Phil Ballard at the Caltrans Highway 1 Gleason Beach Roadway Realignment Project groundbreaking ceremony in October 2021. Above: Construction in June 2022 of the new 900-foot-long bridge that will span the entire valley of Scotty Creek.



Above left: The endangered Myrtle's silverspot butterfly. Right: Scotty Creek.

coastal terrace prairie and the restoration of native grasslands. This work will enhance and create new habitat for the endangered Myrtle's silverspot butterfly, which is found only on the Sonoma-Marín coast. Mitigation of impacts to wetlands will consist of the enhancement and expansion of existing wetlands adjacent to Scotty Creek.

Mitigation for the Highway 1 project will also include extensive work to restore Scotty Creek. As recently as the 1960s, the creek was home to robust populations of coho salmon and steelhead trout. But habitat degradation and the presence of a nearly impassable barrier to fish migration—the existing Highway 1 culvert—have led to a steep decline in the number of fish in the creek. A survey carried out in the mid-2000s found only small numbers of steelhead and no coho at all. As part of the highway project, the old culvert will be removed, allowing free access to the creek for spawning adult fish, and several projects aimed at restoring and enhancing fish habitat upstream of the highway will also be implemented. To keep the water in Scotty Creek cold enough for salmon and steelhead, riparian vegetation will be restored in the lower portion of the creek.

The Gold Ridge RCD has been working with Caltrans

to develop the mitigation projects since 2018. The RCD worked with Caltrans, the California Rangeland Trust and the landowners, Roberta and Phil Ballard, to facilitate the establishment of a conservation easement covering a portion of the Ballard property where mitigation work will be carried out.

The Ballard property is a working ranch, and targeted grazing will be used to suppress non-native species and encourage the establishment and expansion of desirable native species. Fencing of the creek corridor will split the Ballard Ranch into several pastures, so the RCD has worked with the landowners and other Caltrans consultants to develop a rotational grazing plan for the ranch. Rotational grazing has been shown to improve grassland condition and sequester large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere and is increasingly used to encourage more productive and desirable range conditions.

Caltrans hopes to open the new bridge and roadway to traffic in early 2023. Removal of the existing Highway 1 culvert and implementation of mitigation projects are scheduled for next fall.

DID YOU KNOW?



WHAT IS A RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT?

“Resource Conservation Districts, or RCDs, were born out of the catastrophic soil losses and devastating societal impacts witnessed during the Dust Bowl Era. The need to conserve America’s natural resources, most notably its agricultural soils, was federally prioritized and led to the development and funding of RCDs across the country...”

Read more: tinyurl.com/AboutRCDs



HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

“The Resource Conservation Network connects anyone who wants to engage in environmental stewardship to the resources and community they need to feel supported and take action to build a more hopeful future. ...[It] provides a regional focus on the empowerment of the stewards of local lands — from small urban plots to vast open spaces — in resilient land stewardship and improvements to ecosystem health...”

Read more: tinyurl.com/RCDnetwork



WHERE CAN I SEE RCD PROJECTS?

The RCD Project Tracker is a database designed in partnership with Sitka Technology Group. RCDs and partners enter project-level data, accomplishments, and funding expenditures over the course of a project’s timeline from proposal development through planning and design, implementation, and post-implementation.

Learn more about RCD projects on www.RCDprojects.org



CAN AGRICULTURE BE PART OF THE CLIMATE SOLUTION?

“In our 2018 annual newsletter, we shared an article about Ocean Breeze Dairy, their distributor, Organic Valley, the Carbon Cycle Institute, and the RCD who worked together to develop a Carbon Farm Plan for the property, identifying opportunities to increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions...”

More at: tinyurl.com/FarmsClimate

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS

Third Thursday of every month
3:30-5:30 PM (*unless otherwise posted*)
Gold Ridge RCD Office
2776 Sullivan Rd
Sebastopol, CA 95472
Meetings are open to the public

[Board meeting materials can be found online](#)

CONTACT INFORMATION

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