

SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY

Staff Recommendation

June 6, 2025

ALVISO SHORELINE HABITAT RESTORATION

Project No. RA-044

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$330,730 to Grassroots Ecology to restore and enhance two acres of marsh-adjacent upland habitat with a focus on benefits to the burrowing owl and monarch butterfly within the Alviso district of San Jose in Santa Clara County; and through work with local community groups, to provide training, education, and workforce development as part of conducting the restoration and enhancement.

LOCATION: Alviso District, City of San Jose, Santa Clara County; Measure AA Region: South Bay

MEASURE AA PROGRAM CATEGORY: Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program; Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photographs](#)

Exhibit 3: [Plant List](#)

Exhibit 4: [Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement](#)

Exhibit 5: [Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan Chapter 5: Conservation Strategy](#)

Exhibit 6: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority adopt the following resolution and findings:

Resolution:

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thirty thousand seven hundred thirty dollars (\$330,730) to Grassroots Ecology (“grantee”) to restore and enhance two acres of marsh-adjacent upland habitat with a focus on benefits to the burrowing owl and monarch butterfly within the Alviso district of the City of San Jose in Santa Clara County; and, through work with local community groups, to provide training, education, and workforce development as part of conducting the restoration and enhancement. Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Authority the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Authority funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act, Gov. Code Sections 66700-66706.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Clean Water, Pollution Prevention and Habitat Restoration Measure (Measure AA).
3. The Authority independently reviewed and considered the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan Final Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Statement (“FEIR/FEIS”) for the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Community Conservation Plan adopted by the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency on August 2012, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4. The Authority finds that the project falls within the set of covered activities described in the FEIR/FEIS and no significant adverse impacts will result from the project.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Authority authorize a grant of up to \$330,730 to Grassroots Ecology to restore and enhance two acres of marsh-adjacent upland habitat with a focus on benefits to the burrowing owl and monarch butterfly within the Alviso district of the City of San Jose in Santa Clara County (Exhibit 1, Figure 1) and, through work with local community groups, to provide stewardship, education, and workforce development as part of conducting the restoration and enhancement.

The North San Jose Baylands area contains the largest remaining populations of breeding western burrowing owls (Exhibit 2, Figure 1), a California Species of Special Concern, in the South Bay region. Habitat loss from urbanization and land use trends have led to steep population declines across the region. Within the Alviso district (Exhibit 1, Figure 2), excessive flooding at the start of the breeding seasons between 2017 and 2019 reduced breeding and foraging habitat, resulting in declines from 17 nesting pairs in 2017 to only 2 nesting pairs in 2020. While on-the-ground efforts led to a recovery to 5 nesting pairs in 2023, this subpopulation needs continued support through interventions designed to address the loss and degradation of bay shoreline habitat.

Additionally, monarch butterfly populations (Exhibit 2, Figure 2), which are identified in California's Wildlife Action Plan as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need, have declined across the Western U.S. by 90% over the past four decades. A key driver to their decline is the decimation of milkweed (Exhibit 2, Figure 3), which serves as both its primary food source and its sole host plant. The location of the Alviso district within the monarch's annual migration corridor presents an opportunity to expand beneficial vegetation for monarchs.

In 2021, Grassroots Ecology began a pilot project (Exhibit 2, Figure 4) at a location within a 201-acre site in the Alviso district where the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency (SCVHA) holds a conservation easement for activities as part of their Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan (Habitat Plan), a habitat conservation plan/natural community conservation plan. In partnership with SCVHA, Grassroots Ecology planted seven test plots and mobilized hundreds of volunteers (Exhibit 2, Figure 5) to identify optimal planting locations and palettes meant to improve forage and habitat for sensitive wildlife. In the time since the pilot began, SCVHA observed burrowing owls foraging in the pilot area and monarchs establishing themselves on the milkweed within the site.

The project builds on the successes of Grassroots Ecology's pilot by continuing to enhance shoreline habitat (Exhibit 2, Figure 6) for improved forage at the site, but with activities expanded to include participation from nearby communities and from youth-based job training programs (Exhibit 2, Figure 7). This multi-benefit approach will help fulfill the community's need for opportunities to develop greater connections to local lands and contribute to the recovery of sensitive species. Charismatic species such as burrowing owls and monarchs have the potential to galvanize involvement from community members, who will then be exposed to the larger concepts of biodiversity and climate resilience.

The project consists of the following elements:

- **Grow watershed specific plants** using hand-collected, locally native seeds that were selected for hardiness and maximum habitat value for burrowing owls, monarchs, and other native wildlife. All plants (Exhibit 2, Figure 8) will account for local conditions including periodic flooding and salinity.
- **Restore and enhance two acres** through native plant installation, invasives removal, and site maintenance. Grassroots Ecology staff, including their Habitat Restoration and Summer Naturalist Interns, will coordinate with Alviso in Action (AIA), San Jose Conservation Corps (SJCC), AmeriCorps, and volunteers to expand the planting areas from their test pilot and perform weed control (Exhibit 2, Figure 9) on the 2-acre project site within the 201-acre Alviso site. Grassroots Ecology staff will perform maintenance tasks consisting of watering,

weeding, pruning, and mulching, in between volunteer days. 22-27 community workdays are expected to take place.

- **Conduct five to six biomonitoring events** for participants as part of a career development program to study species richness. These events involve photo monitoring to track native species richness before and after the project; bird surveys conducted by project partner, Audubon/Talon; and bioblitz (Exhibit 2, Figure 10) events that engage the community to identify organisms occurring at the site and document them using mobile device software.
- **Facilitate workforce development opportunities** using the project site as a training ground for Grassroots Ecology's own interns, AmeriCorps members, SJCC, and AIA to develop hands-on skills in shoreline restoration. Participants will be taught sustainable land management practices, including planting, mulching, watering, and weed removal while teaching them about the species, plants, history, and restoration objectives. 10-12 SJCC training sessions are expected to take place while 40-50 interns/AmeriCorps members and 60-70 SJCC members are expected to be trained throughout the project.

Grassroots Ecology will mobilize and coordinate an array of institutional partners, subject matter experts, and community groups to realize the project's goals:

- **SCVHA** has a conservation easement on the property, which is owned in fee title by the Cities of San Jose and Santa Clara. SCVHA has conducted habitat management at the site since 2013, and has contracted with Grassroots Ecology since 2021 to plant, maintain, and monitor test plots with volunteers. Grassroots Ecology currently has a contract with SCVHA to support maintenance of the test plots through December 2026 and that funding is included in the match (see Project Financing section below). SCVHA will keep the property owners, the Cities of San Jose and Santa Clara, informed as needed about grant-related activities.
- **Audubon Society/Talon Ecological Research Group (Talon)**, which contracts with SCVHA to enhance owl habitat at the site, will coordinate mulch deliveries, provide feedback on plant selection, and support biomonitoring at the site by conducting bird surveys and monitoring camera traps.
- **Santa Clara Valley Water District (Valley Water)** provided pilot funding for the project. Valley Water supports the proposed project and will provide technical advice as needed.
- **SJCC** will bring its members to the site for hands-on education and training in shoreline restoration. They will supplement the work performed by volunteers by employing restoration methods that involve specialized equipment.
- **AmeriCorps** members, who serve 10 to 11-month terms at Grassroots Ecology through California Climate Action Corps (CCAC) and the Watershed Stewards Program (WSP), both external workforce development programs, will gain experience in habitat restoration through the project. Grassroots Ecology expects to continue hosting annual cohorts of AmeriCorps members, though future placements depend on the availability of funding that supports CCAC/WSP's operations.
- **AIA**, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission to improve environmental conditions in Alviso by protecting and preserving the community from environmental impacts (Exhibit 2, Figure 11), will support restoration activities at the site and receive stipends for participation.

Grassroots Ecology's mission is to leverage the power of the community to create healthy ecosystems across Silicon Valley, from the foothills to San Francisco Bay. They engage 8,500 youth and adults annually to protect and improve nine Silicon Valley watersheds in eleven cities and two counties, Santa Clara and San Mateo. Working together with public and partner agencies, Grassroots Ecology restores riparian habitats and natural lands, reduces, monitors, and prevents water pollution, enhances water conservation and stormwater capture, and preserves local biodiversity. Their work at the site dates back to 2021, when the pilot project was launched. Following pilot completion, Grassroots Ecology worked under contract with the SCVHA to water and maintain the test plots, install additional plants, and conduct selective weeding and invasive plant management around the plots. Grassroots Ecology has successfully completed many similar projects, including the Coastal Conservancy-funded Downtown Redwood Creek Restoration Project and the Permanente Creek Enhancement at Shoreline Park Project.

The project utilizes Grassroots Ecology's model of community-based restoration, which involves local students and community members in all aspects of restoration—from weed removal to plant installation to biomonitoring—while deepening their skills, knowledge, and appreciation of the ecosystem. The grant will catalyze an exciting new partnership between Grassroots Ecology and AIA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission to improve environmental conditions in Alviso by protecting and preserving the community from environmental impacts. Their President, Marcos Espinoza, is familiar with the project site and enthusiastic about connecting their members with paid opportunities to access and steward these lands, which are not accessible to the general public. Alviso in Action is an ideal partner for this project as their membership is comprised of Alviso community members with a vested interest in improving local environmental conditions. Other community partners who will benefit from the project include the SJCC and AmeriCorps who welcome the unique hands-on opportunities this project will provide to their participants including training in habitat restoration, naturalist education, and climate adaptation work. The project will also engage a core group of volunteers who currently contribute their time to the site, all of whom are deeply invested in the project and are enthusiastic about continuing their volunteer service.

The 201-acre site falls within the 100-year Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) floodplain and floods occasionally (Exhibit 2, Figure 12). To mitigate flooding, Grassroots Ecology has developed a planting palette (Exhibit 3) that includes salt-tolerant species that can also withstand periodic flooding. Because flooding drastically impacted burrowing owl burrows during the flood events between 2017-2019, Talon relocated the burrows to higher plateaus that were constructed as a response to those events. Grassroots Ecology will focus community engagement to the 18+ age group, manage the size of work crews, maintain a buffer separating restoration areas and owl burrows, and train participants on procedures that take the sensitivity of burrowing owls into account.

Site Description: The 201-acre site is directly adjacent to the San Jose-Santa Clara Regional Wastewater Facility in San Jose's Alviso district, the lowest point in the San Francisco Bay Area. Restoration work will take place in a 2-acre area (Exhibit 1, Figure 3) between the access road and the Wastewater Facility boundary. Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency holds a conservation easement on the site, which is co-owned by the Cities of San Jose and Santa Clara and is a part of the Habitat Agency's Reserve System. While much of the property consists of elevations that vary between 3-5 feet below sea level, the project area itself is at sea level. Because of the low elevation, the property falls within the 100-year FEMA floodplain and

experiences occasional flooding during extreme storm events. As much of the land is subsided, it is vulnerable to sea level rise and would be underwater in the absence of levees.

Situated just upland of a tidal marsh, the site consists primarily of grasslands vegetated with non-native grasses and plants that provide minimal habitat value. Its proximity near the marsh provides the potential for valuable marsh upland transition habitat for wildlife seeking refuge during high tide events. Numerous former salt evaporation ponds in the area and northward into Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge are being restored to wetlands as part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. Due to poor drainage and elevation of the site, rainwater from elsewhere in the watershed mixes with water from the tidal wetland and occasionally floods in some areas. As of the 2020 Census, the Alviso community was home to ~2,250 residents and 560 households, with a racial makeup of approximately 60% Hispanic/Latino, 24% White, 14% Asian, and 1.7% Native American. Alviso was first incorporated as an independent town in 1852, serving as a major shipping port and transportation hub between Santa Clara Valley and San Francisco Bay. In 1968, it was annexed by the City of San Jose, becoming the city's sole waterfront district as well as the headquarters of several tech companies and corporations. In the years since, Alviso has experienced severe flooding, most recently in 1983 and 1995, displacing residents and damaging homes and businesses. The Authority-funded South San Francisco Bay Shoreline Project will provide coastal flood risk management for the district through the construction of a levee and restoration of former salt ponds to tidal wetlands.

PROJECT FINANCING

San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority	\$330,730
Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency	\$37,000
Grassroots Ecology	\$16,500
Project Total	\$384,230

Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency's funds will be used for maintenance activities and volunteer workdays throughout the project. Grassroots Ecology's funds are unrestricted and come from individual donations.

Grassroots Ecology has secured \$46,492 in in-kind donations. \$13,920 of that amount will come from Talon Ecological Research Group for costs related to bird surveys. \$10,000 will come from SJCC to subsidize the cost of their workdays. The remaining \$22,572 will come from volunteer hours.

CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION, THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY ACT:

The project is consistent with Government Code Section 66704.5 of the Authority's Enabling Legislation, and therefore is eligible for grant funding from the Authority. Grassroots Ecology is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, which is an eligible grantee under Section 66704.5(a). The project will occur along shoreline in the Alviso district in Santa Clara County on uplands

adjacent to tidal wetlands that can provide transitional habitat and/or marsh migration space, as well as areas that are needed to enhance the project's resilience to sea level rise, which is within the Authority's jurisdiction. The project will restore and enhance natural habitat on the San Francisco Bay shoreline in the project area, making it an eligible project as defined in Section 66704.5(b). Funding this habitat restoration project is consistent with Section 66704.5(e), which allows the Authority to award grants for all phases of construction of eligible projects.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the programs and activities of Measure AA, as outlined below:

The project supports the *Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program*'s purpose of providing clean water for fish, birds, wildlife and people through restoration of the marsh-upland transition zone that provides natural filtration and removes pollution from water entering the Bay.

The project supports the *Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program*'s purpose to significantly improve wildlife habitat, by restoring wetlands and other Bay and shoreline habitats to benefit shorebirds, waterfowl, and fish; and by providing for stewardship, maintenance and monitoring of a habitat restoration project to ensure their ongoing benefits to wildlife and people.

CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PRIORITIZATION CRITERIA:

- **Greatest positive impact.** The project will restore and enhance natural habitats along shoreline in the Alviso district in Santa Clara County on uplands adjacent to tidal wetlands. While these improvements benefit the entire ecosystem, they are designed to provide foraging habitat to the burrowing owl and its prey base, augment food sources and host plants for the monarch butterfly, as well as enhance habitat for the Crotch's bumblebee, the large marble butterfly, and marsh-dwelling mammals and birds in need of refugia during high tides. The project will empower people from local historically underrepresented communities to become invested in this restoration effort by inspiring and training residents to become stewards of their local coastal resources.
- 1. **Greatest long-term impact.** This project is designed to improve land impacted by development by installing a biologically diverse, hardy landscape of plants that will be resilient to climate change impacts once established. This vegetation will benefit sensitive status species and other shoreline wildlife. In addition to habitat benefits for the Alviso district, this project will also provide community benefits by training and inspiring young adults to pursue careers in conservation; and by energizing and equipping members of the surrounding community to be stewards of their local shoreline and natural spaces.
- 2. **Leveraging resources and partnerships.** The project leverages Grassroots Ecology's partnership with SCVHA to plant, maintain, and monitor plots at the project site with volunteers. The project also includes a partnership with Audubon Society/Talon Ecological Research Group, who enhance owl habitat at the site through a contract with SCVHA, and

who will provide in-kind services in the form of plant selection, coordination of mulch deliveries, and bird surveys. Santa Clara Valley Water District, which funded the initial pilot at the site, will continue supporting the project through technical support. SJCC will subsidize their own costs to participate in the project and CRC will provide technical support and capacity building to Alviso in Action.

3. **Economically disadvantaged communities.** Included in the project area (Exhibit 1, Figure 4) is the community of Alviso, which is identified as an economically disadvantaged community (San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority's Economically Disadvantaged Communities map, August 2023). In addition to providing environmental benefits, the project will engage the communities in Alviso and other surrounding areas and provide education and training in shoreline restoration practices that will prepare them for future stewardship and entry in the green workforce.
4. **Benefits to economy.** The project is designed to strengthen the economy by training people from the local community to become skilled at sustainable land management. The benefits of this approach are three-fold. First, the local workforce is connected to job training opportunities that are increasingly difficult to obtain due to the rising cost of school tuition. Second, the training program will help satisfy industry-wide demand for a diverse and skilled workforce. And third, developing the local workforce and fiscally supporting community groups for stewardship events will keep money within the community.
5. **Engage youth and young adults.** The project will engage young adults who are part of Grassroots Ecology's paid 10-month Habitat Restoration Internship program, Summer Naturalist Internship program, and 11-month AmeriCorps placement programs by providing more experiences in shoreline restoration, biomonitoring, ecological education, and community engagement. Internships will prioritize community college students and first-generation immigrants. SJCC, consisting primarily of Black, Indigenous, and youth of color will have opportunities to participate in planned workdays as part of a larger training program for sustainable land management.
6. **Monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship.** Annual vegetation and wildlife monitoring will be conducted through photomonitoring; project partners will survey birds twice annually while camera traps will capture mammal activity. Species richness will be documented through bioblitz events. Milkweed data will be analyzed and shared with the broader community to determine best practices for monarch butterfly conservation. These combined methods will inform adjustments to the project as needed. The plant palette was developed for high survival rates and low maintenance once established. SCVHA will continue site maintenance beyond the life of the grant consistent with their obligations under their conservation easement.
7. **Coastal Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.** The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program's Criteria:

- a. It supports adopted local or regional plans including the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan (2012), elements of the SFBJV Implementation Strategy for South Bay Subregion, and the San Francisco Estuary Blueprint (2022).
 - b. It is multijurisdictional and serves a regional constituency. The site is co-owned by the Cities of San Jose and Santa Clara and is managed by the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency, and the project complements the Agency's efforts to implement the regional and multijurisdictional Santa Clara Valley Habitat Conservation Plan.
 - c. It can be implemented in a timely way as it builds on existing partnerships, planting plots, and programs and is grounded in past performance
 - It provides opportunities for benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented given the vulnerable status of the burrowing owl and monarch butterfly and the urgency of expanded high-quality habitat to support their survival and recovery.
 - d. It includes matching funds from other sources of funding or assistance including the SCVHA, SJCC, Talon, volunteer labor, and individual donations.
- 8. San Francisco Bay Joint Venture's Implementation Strategy.** The project was adopted by the Joint Venture in the fall of 2024, demonstrating alignment with the Implementation Strategy by restoring marsh upland transition zone habitat, providing multiple benefits and demonstrating community support through involvement of community partners.

CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY'S INTERIM TRIBAL CONSULTATION POLICY:

Per the Authority's Tribal Consultation Policy, Resolution 108, 21 letters were sent to tribes of the San Francisco Bay Area on March 26, 2025. No responses were received related to this project.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

In August 2012, the SCVHA adopted the joint Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan Final Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Statement (FEIR/FEIS) for the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Community Conservation Plan (Habitat Plan), pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The FEIR/FEIS evaluates the environmental implications for adopting the Habitat Plan.

The following two subsections further describe the applicability of Habitat Plan towards the project:

Reserve System

The project is located at a property where SCVHA holds a conservation easement and is part of the Habitat Plan Reserve System (Reserve System), a growing set of natural lands that support the conservation strategy of the Habitat Plan. Within the Reserve System, the Habitat Agency is afforded the ability to implement various management activities, covered by the FEIR/FEIS's umbrella, including various types of restoration planting and vegetation management actions.

Page 2-27 states “Land preservation is a key component of the conservation strategy, which calls for the establishment, enhancement, and long-term management of a Reserve System for the benefit of natural communities, Covered Species, and overall biodiversity and ecosystem functions.”

Conservation Actions

On Page 2-30, the FEIR/FEIS very briefly summarizes Conservation Actions of the Habitat Plan, specifically identifying management measures within the Reserve System which identifies activities of native plantings and vegetation management.

Under the Habitat Plan, the conservation strategy (Exhibit 5, Chapter 5.1) provides mitigation for impacts on covered species on the basis of species and habitat needs. However, the 2-acre restoration project at issue is not mitigation, it is consistent with the conservation strategy in the Habitat Plan, but goes above and beyond the Habitat Plan requirements for mitigation. For example, the conservation strategy of the Habitat Plan requires habitat restoration for aquatic habitats. There is no requirement for restoration of any upland habitats such as this 2-acre project. Moreover, the Habitat Agency is getting no acreage of “restoration credit” that goes toward satisfying any restoration obligation for this work. Finally, while SCVHA is not required to implement the project under the Habitat Plan, because it goes above and beyond the mitigation required by the plan, this type of work is allowable as part of the conservation strategy.

Conclusion

Because of the scope and location, the project falls within the wide swath of conservation activities under the Habitat Plan. Authority staff have reviewed the FEIR/FEIS and concur that the project falls within the set of covered activities described and no significant adverse impacts will result from the project. The FEIR/FEIS also discusses impacts that are less than significant with mitigation measures, but those impacts stem from non-conservation action activities that are not part of the project and thus are not analyzed here.

Staff will file a Notice of Determination upon approval.