

# FALL 2021

## *Inside this issue*

- 3 Advocating to protect SDC's wildlife corridor lands
- 6 Celebrating, honoring and remembering
- 8 Join us in becoming "A Force for Nature"



*... to protect the land forever*



The 2.5-mile habitat levee (the new shoreline) was built to protect surrounding lands from bay water and provide refuge for marsh wildlife. It is eroding from wind waves—a common problem around San Francisco Bay. Photo by Corby Hines.

## PIONEERING A NATURE-BASED SOLUTION FOR SHORELINE EROSION AT SEARS POINT

Imagine if we had known in 2007 that a devastating fire would tear through Santa Rosa in 10 years time and that fire would become an annual concern for all of us. What might we have done during that decade to anticipate and adapt?

The most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change leaves no doubt that the effects of climate change are already here. Not only must we reduce emissions,

but we need to urgently begin adapting and becoming resilient to what is happening now as well as in the immediate future. This is why Sonoma Land Trust has redoubled its efforts to conserve and restore 10,000 acres within the Sonoma Baylands along San Pablo Bay. Besides providing habitat, sequestering and storing carbon, filtering pollution, and contributing greatly to our economy and well-being, tidal wetlands are our best defense against sea level rise.

(Continued on page 4)



## A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### “SPRING” IN FALL

As nature begins her beautiful transformation toward a time of dormancy and hibernation, we at the Land Trust are feeling a powerful sense of new beginnings and awakening energies. California (once again) is leading the way in the fight against climate change by making unprecedented budget allocations to natural climate solutions. This signals new priorities and real hope for meaningful climate resilience and adaptation for human and non-human communities alike.

Together with our local legislators, we've been able to make a strong case for some of that investment to come to our hard-hit county. The Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative has received

renewed funding of \$1 million for wildfire risk reduction work, and the Baylands partnership was awarded \$5 million for acquiring properties for wetland restoration along Highway 37.

The Land Trust's leadership is also crucial in other ways. As the State works to eliminate barriers to urgently needed action, the data from our wildfire risk reduction work is being shared with CAL FIRE in their efforts to streamline permitting processes and management protocols for putting “good fire” on the ground. And on the bay, we are pioneering groundbreaking new tools and methods for bolstering our natural defenses against sea level rise.

None of this would be remotely achievable without your support. Your investments in our comprehensive campaign support our work in conservation science, policy and implementation that makes us eligible for matching government funding—and allows us to scale up our protection of Sonoma County's landscapes.

Thank you so much. You are truly “A Force for Nature!”

**EAMON O'BYRNE**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

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## MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations.

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# ADVOCATING TO PROTECT SDC'S WILDLIFE CORRIDOR LANDS

BY JOHN MCCAULL



The Sonoma Developmental Center property is an important part of a regionally critical, but narrow, wildlife corridor located between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamas. The preliminary alternatives for Sonoma County's specific plan for redeveloping the 200-acre historic campus call for a range of high-density development and do not sufficiently address how this vital habitat and movement corridor will be protected.

California closed the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) in 2018 after 127 years of operation as a residential hospital for people with developmental disabilities. The developed campus along Arnold Drive is part of a much larger—and much wilder—950+-acre property that stretches from oak woodlands along Highway 12 to redwood groves high up in Sonoma Mountain's creek canyons.

SDC is also situated in the heart of the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor, a narrow linkage of high-quality habitat connecting Point Reyes to the mountains of Napa and Lake Counties. The corridor is a key part of the continentally important Blue Ridge Wildlife Corridor network, which connects the coast and bay to the forests of Northern California. A 2015 report concluded that SDC is “integral to the character of the Sonoma Valley and the ecological

## Protecting the lands of SDC is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the Sonoma Valley.

health of the North Bay.” The flow of plants and animals across this corridor is critical to forest health (clean air and fire safety), watershed health (quality and quantity) and, ultimately, human health (recreation and pathogen management).

Because of concerns about a “surplus property” sale of SDC by the State, your land trust launched the “Transform SDC” project in 2014. Five years later, local lawmakers delivered on their promise to craft a deal with the State for protection of the property's exceptional open space and wildlife corridor lands, while also mandating future housing as part of a funding

deal for a reuse plan for the core campus.

Since Sonoma County has land use authority for the property, California provided funding to the County to create a “specific plan” for SDC, which is scheduled for completion in summer 2022. After our years of advocacy, community engagement, research and planning, we are ready to engage on conservation outcomes that enjoy widespread public support and scientific backing. A key part of achieving these outcomes will be new and innovative ways to blend the human and ecological communities.

(Continued on page 7)



SCOTT HESS PHOTOGRAPHY



Above: In October, 2015, Sonoma Land Trust changed the map of San Francisco Bay by breaching the levee at Sears Point Ranch along Highway 37 and letting in the tides for the first time in 140 years. With saltwater quickly filling the newly constructed 1,000-acre tidal marsh basin—one of the largest such projects in the Western U.S.—the primary goal was to restore the land that had been diked and drained for over a century back to tidal wetlands.

Right: Working with a team of scientists and engineers, the Land Trust has developed a plan to adaptively manage the levee erosion with vegetation, logs, soil and the power of tidal currents. Several hundred logs 15–25 feet long are being strategically embedded and anchored in front of the levees to block wave energy. This photo shows the beginning process of placing a log before getting ready to embed it.



Many of our members will recall that on October 15, 2015, we breached the levee at Sears Point, returning the tides to nearly 1,000 acres of historic tidal marsh. In the years since, we have documented seals, river otters, bat rays, vast schools of baitfish, tens of thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds, and the beginnings of a vegetated marsh. The site has quickly accumulated 2–4 feet of sediment, pushing it toward elevations that will support cordgrass and pickleweed in the years to come. Even with this rapid rate of sediment accretion, however, we find ourselves needing to combat wave-driven shoreline erosion to give the developing marshlands time to grow once-abundant natural defenses against storms and flooding.

### THE “LIVING SHORELINE” IS A NATURE-BASED APPROACH

Our nature-based approach incorporates logs, mud, plants, gravel and natural processes that work together to protect the shoreline. This natural infrastructure is different from the more conventional use of riprap (large boulders), which is a static and unyielding approach in a dynamic ecological setting and lacks habitat value. Nature-based solutions, on the other hand, allow the marsh to respond and adapt to future conditions.

Sonoma Land Trust is mimicking nature by installing hundreds of logs along the shoreline to reduce the wave erosion. Logs used to be common in marshland systems, washing in as treefall from the Sierra and landing on the shores of the bay. In this case, however, the logs were provided by Caltrans and PG&E. Caltrans provided logs from regional roadway projects while PG&E delivered them from regional utility line clearing. Together, the two agencies saved the project nearly \$130,000.

Native species, such as cordgrass, as well as pickleweed and saltgrass, are beginning to colonize the compacted mud bench in front of and behind where the logs are being placed. To assist the establishment of these marshland-loving plants, we are adding clean soil that was dredged years ago from nearby Port Sonoma on the bay side of the logs so they eventually become swash bars, which are small berms that form in nature from wave action.

Closer to the water is where Pacific cordgrass ought to be growing. This densely rooted perennial grass is the first critical line of defense against incoming waves bound for tidal marsh shorelines.

A 20–30-foot-wide swath of cordgrass can significantly absorb and dissipate wave energy. For two years, our crews have been harvesting cordgrass from patches within the project area and transplanting it along the wave-exposed shoreline. The plantings are beginning to coalesce and, hopefully, will soon form a continuous border along the shoreline.

In areas where the erosion is at its worst, additional elements have been added, such as fences made of coyote brush placed further out in the water and intended only to last a season while the cordgrass gets established, and lightly sprinkled gravel where the mudflat erosion is particularly acute and in need of stabilization.

### NATURE USES WHAT WORKS

All of the elements of this project imitate nature because nature uses what works. We are simply providing the missing pieces that allow the natural processes to





Below: Marshes significantly reduce wave energy and where they have been lost or have not yet been fully restored, as at Sears Point, shoreline erosion (like in the “Before” photo) is common. If left unchecked, the erosion could threaten the stability of the flood protection functions of the levee and the public access trails. After the current project and subsequent plantings are completed, the gently sloping habitat levee should look more like the “After” photo.

Before



After



CORBY HINES

act. The sum of these parts is built on the decades of observation and experience of our design team at Siegel Environmental, the willingness of the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge to participate in forward-thinking design, and the support of the California Wildlife Conservation Board. Sonoma Land Trust’s Julian Meisler, longtime Baylands program

manager, is serving as project manager, and we hired Dixon Marine Services to construct the project.

“Our adaptive management approach is derived from natural processes observed by our design team onsite and around the bay,” concludes Julian. “We’ll monitor its progress and, if we’re successful, we

hope this will be a tool that other managers can use to manage the chronic issue of shoreline erosion within tidal marsh settings.”

When the Eliot Trail reopens in early winter, we hope you will take the opportunity to stroll the levee and make your own observations. For our part, we will be monitoring the site closely for three years and reporting back.



CORBY HINES

Before installing the logs, it was first necessary to begin to stabilize the levee with native marsh plants. Over the past 18 months, crews transplanted 3,100 Pacific cordgrass plants along the front of the levee, which are growing well. Planting will continue this year and next. Ultimately, it is the cordgrass and other marsh plants that will provide the greatest shoreline defense.

# CELEBRATING, HONORING AND REMEMBERING

The following donated gifts, made between November 1, 2020 and August 31, 2021, honor exceptional individuals and celebrate special events. It's a privilege for Sonoma Land Trust to receive these donations from the heart.

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Gary Yee

**In memory of Stephen Yingst**

Christina Barasch

**In memory of Maria Zarrillo**

Andrew Zee

**In memory of all those who have died of COVID-19**

Sheila Bigelow

(Continued from page 3: Advocating to protect SDC's wildlife corridor lands)

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## **The Land Trust also supports equitable and affordable housing focused in SDC's already-built environment.**

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The Land Trust also supports equitable and affordable housing focused in SDC's already-built environment, and we recognize that we cannot solve the climate crisis without solving the housing crisis. A top priority is to determine the appropriate level of density, and to create a building footprint and design standards, that are all based on the best scientific recom-



mendations for wildlife corridor preservation and species' movement needs.

From a community perspective, the Transform SDC framework is exactly what we have been advocating for. SDC can be successfully "transformed" from a shuttered and vacant institutional setting if we create a compelling vision for the land and use the County's general plan and zoning powers to authorize a new mix of compatible uses. We believe that it is possible to have appropriate affordable housing in conjunction with a stable and well-protected wildlife corridor—not just at SDC, but all across California.

With the ever-increasing need to build more housing while protecting the integrity of the wildlife corridor, the old models of development won't work in a

region facing numerous environmental and infrastructure constraints, especially during a drought and ever-present fire danger. To achieve our conservation vision, the Land Trust will assemble crucial data and input for a "preferred alternative" option for the specific plan. That data will include policies and guidelines requiring conservation and enhancement of the wildlife corridor on the property's core campus, and implementation recommendations for the transfer of the open space lands to the State and County park agencies.

Protecting the lands of SDC is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the Sonoma Valley. If we act now, we can create a new paradigm that safeguards the future for all of the communities, human and non-human, between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamas Mountains.

*John McCaull is Sonoma Land Trust's land acquisition director.*



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JOIN US IN BECOMING

# *a FORCE for NATURE*

As a leading conservation nonprofit in Sonoma County, we believe we must lead the way in preserving the diverse natural landscapes and infrastructure that sustain us. That is why we recently launched an \$80 million campaign, “A Force for Nature.”

Decades of conservation science have made it very clear: The best solution we have to the tremendous challenges we face is working with nature itself. Nature-based solutions, outlined on our campaign website [weareforcefornature.org](http://weareforcefornature.org), are already helping us mitigate flood risk, offset carbon emissions and become resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

As of August 30, more than \$65.6 million has been committed to this campaign.

Thank you to our supporters! All donations made to Sonoma Land Trust during the campaign are counted toward the total goal. This includes all annual gifts, multiple-year pledges, planned gift intentions and realized planned gifts, as well as grants from businesses, foundations and government entities.

If you would like to discuss your campaign commitment, please contact Shannon Nichols, director of philanthropy, at [shannon@sonomalandtrust.org](mailto:shannon@sonomalandtrust.org).

We are grateful to our many supporters and partners, as well as for the volunteer leaders who dedicate their time, talent and treasure toward our mission.

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