



Sonoma County Habitat Conservation Plan/ Natural Community Conservation Plan

Public Workshop September 22, 2025

Meeting Objectives

- Share information about the Conservation Sonoma program and development of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and a Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP)
- Present findings from received feedback
- Update on next steps for the HCP/NCCP



Agenda

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Review of Habitat Conservation Plan and Natural Community Conservation Plan Development
3. Community Feedback Received
4. Next Steps and Staying Updated
5. Meeting Close



Participation Protocols

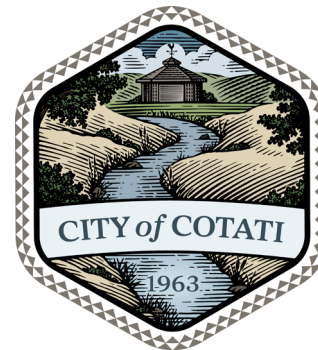
- Aiming to hear from everyone – please be concise
- Working toward shared understanding – ask questions and learn from each other
- Capturing your thoughts –
 - Use the mic/get close to the Owl
 - Written comments: comment form; Zoom chat

Review of the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP

1. Conservation Sonoma
2. HCP/NCCP Development

What is Conservation Sonoma?

Conservation Sonoma is a countywide initiative that brings together the County of Sonoma (led by Permit Sonoma), Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Cotati, and the Town of Windsor to create a joint **Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)** and **Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP)**.



HCP/NCCP Development Roles

- **Permit Sonoma** – lead for development of the HCP/NCCP, including acquisition of grant funding for plan development and selection/management of consultant team.
- **USFWS, NMFS, and CDFW** – the federal and state wildlife agencies responsible for reviewing and approving the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP and Incidental Take Permit applications; also provides technical assistance in plan development.
- **Core Planning Team** – Conservation Sonoma participants and consultant (ICF). Provides direction, guidance, and assistance in developing the HCP/NCCP.
- **Public Advisory Committee (PAC)** – a forum for broad community participation; provides feedback to Core Planning Team on HCP/NCCP.
- **Science Advisory Panel** – professional scientists independent from Conservation Sonoma and wildlife agencies who provide review and comment on the science of the plan.

Goals of the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP

- Develop and implement a **regional approach to habitat conservation**
- **Collaborative partnerships** with landowners, Tribes, conservation organizations and others to protect and enhance County habitats and working lands
- Provide a **programmatic process** for the mitigation of impacts
- **Authorize the use of Incidental Take Permits** for development and other projects that potentially affect sensitive species and their habitats
- Provide **local control to the County and co-permittees** to implement a streamlined endangered species permitting process for activities to be described in the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP

The Sonoma County HCP/NCCP will:

- Preserve a large portion of Sonoma County's natural habitat and agricultural land
- Protect listed species and their habitats with a large, interconnected reserve system
- Ensure compliance with the federal and state Endangered Species Acts
- Reduce regulatory timelines and costs
- Provide standardized mitigation and conservation measures for proposed projects
- Streamline permitting procedures

The Sonoma County HCP/NCCP will not:

- Approve or deny specific projects
- Replace or change Conservation Sonoma participants' permitting or planning processes
- Add or reduce development permitting requirements
- Weaken existing protections for listed species
- Eliminate the need for federal and state Endangered Species Act permits

HCP/NCCP Ancillary Benefits

- Regulatory streamlining opportunities
- Support opportunities for conservation
 - Grants
 - Conservation Easements
 - Conservation Banks
 - Open space protection
- Recreational opportunities
- Provide long-term certainty



Photo credit: USFWS

Regulatory Streamlining Opportunities

- How much streamlining?
 - ESA, CESA
 - “one-stop shop”?
- Streamlining for Federal/State species:
 - Incidental take permit under Section 10 ESA
 - Programmatic Section 7 consultation under ESA
 - Bald and Golden Eagle Act compliance (Eagle take permit)
 - Migratory Bird Treaty Act compliance
 - Incidental Take Permit under Section 2081 CESA or Section **2835 NCCPA**
 - CEQA special-status species
- Streamlining for Federal/State waters:
 - Regional or programmatic general permit, Section 404 CWA
 - Water quality certification under Section 401 CWA
 - Regional programmatic Section 1602 Fish and Game Code stream and lakebed alteration agreement

Comparison of ESA and CESA

ESA

CESA

Take of individuals prohibited

Take of individuals prohibited

Habitat often protected (harm)

Habitat may be protected (required for NCCP)

4(d) rules allow reduced prohibitions for threatened species

Same prohibitions for threatened and endangered species

Section 7 incidental take statement or Section 10 incidental take permit

Section 2081(b) or 2835 incidental take permit

Plants protected only where federal action involved

Plants somewhat protected under NPPA/CESA

Federal agency consultation process

No state agency consultation process

NEPA trigger for Section 10 permit

CEQA trigger for 2081(b) or 2835 permit

What is a Habitat Conservation Plan?



Photo credit: Bernadette Clueit

- Legal definition of a conservation plan under ESA Section 10(a)(2)(A):
 - *No permit may be issued by the Secretary authorizing any taking referred to in paragraph (1)(B) unless the applicant therefore submits to the Secretary a conservation plan*
- Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) is required for issuance of a Section 10 Incidental Take Permit

What is a Natural Community Conservation Plan?

- ***Fish and Game Code Section 2835*** Incidental take permitted for listed species and one of the only mechanisms for incidental take of California Fully Protected Species.
- ***Landscape-scale conservation*** Protects habitat, natural communities, and species diversity on a landscape level (through creation of habitat reserves or “measures that provide equivalent conservation of covered species”).
- ***Regulatory Assurance*** Similar long-term assurances as HCPs for CESA compliance, including ability to plan for species that are not yet listed, but are likely to become listed within the permit term.

Unique Requirements of NCCPs

- Planning Agreement
- Public participation
- Independent scientific review
- Implementing Agreement
- CDFW Findings to approve a NCCP

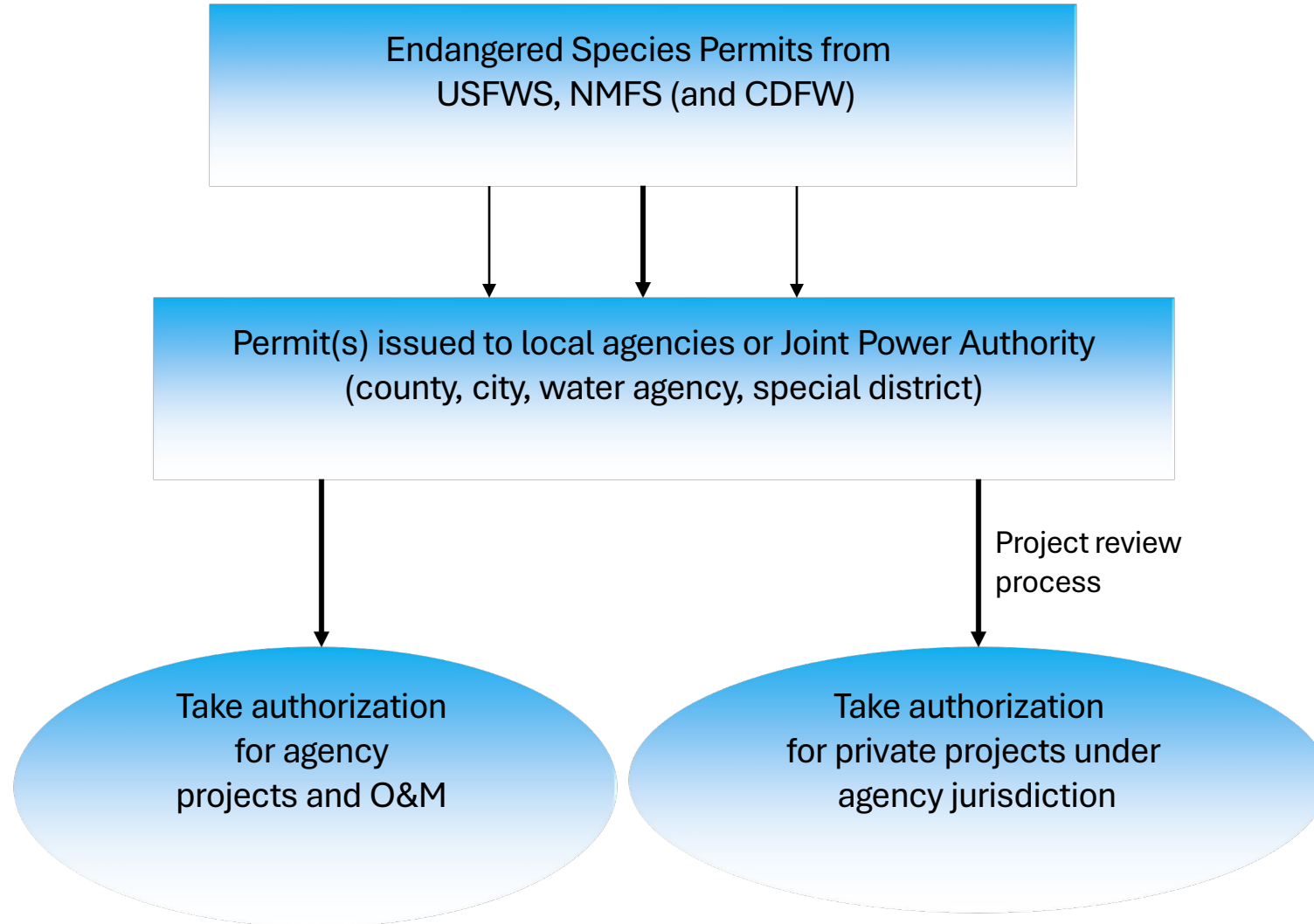
Elements of an HCP/NCCP (1 of 2)

Element	HCP	NCCP
Program goals	Recommended	Recommended
Plan area (geographic coverage)	Required	Required
Covered species	Required	Required
Biological goals and objectives	Required	Required
Covered activities	Required	Required
Permit duration	Required	Required
Impact on species (level of take)	Required	Required
Indirect impacts	Required	Implied
Impacts on natural communities	N/A	Recommended
Cumulative impacts	Recommended	Recommended
Impacts to critical habitat	Recommended	N/A
Conservation measures	Required	Required
Avoidance and minimization measures	Required	Recommended
Expected outcomes with conservation	Recommended	Recommended

Elements of an HCP/NCCP (2 of 2)

Element	HCP	NCCP
Monitoring plan	Required	Required
Adaptive management plan	Required	Required
Implementation cost estimate	Required	Required
Funding strategy	Required	Required
Assurances requested	Required	Required
Changed circumstances and remedial measures	Required	Required
Unforeseen circumstances provisions	Required	Required
Implementation structure	Recommended	Required
Permit amendment process	Required	Required
Alternatives to take	Required	N/A

Programmatic HCP/NCCP: How it Works



Key Benefits of HCP/NCCP

- **Local Control** The Sonoma County HCP/NCCP will shift management of ESA and CESA compliance for activities covered in the Plan from federal and state regulatory agencies to the local level.
- **Improved and increased species conservation** The Sonoma County HCP/NCCP will provide a more efficient process for protecting natural resources by approaching mitigation on a landscape-scale that will be more ecologically valuable and easier to manage than individual mitigation sites typical of a project-by-project permitting approach.
- **Streamlined permitting** With increased local control of the ESA and CESA compliance process, permitting times will be reduced and mitigation requirements and fees will be standardized.



Community Feedback on the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP Process

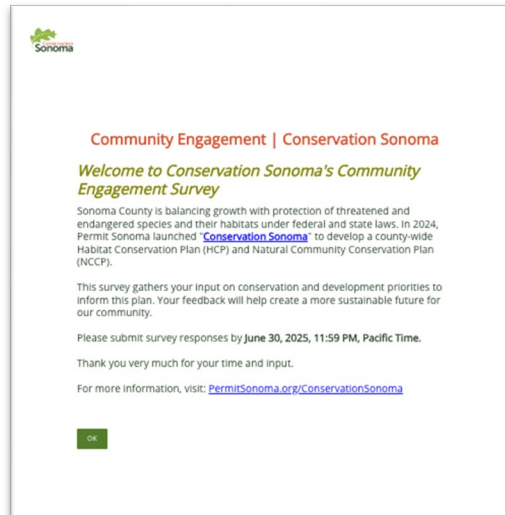
1. SurveyMonkey Community Survey Results
2. Planning Agreement Public Comments
3. Community Questions Received

How We Gathered Feedback

Two Feedback Mechanisms

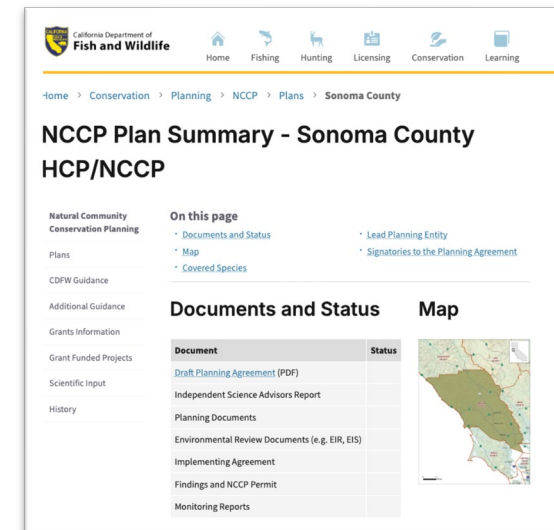
Community Survey (May–June 2025)

- Purpose: Gauge public knowledge, concerns, and priorities
- Focus: HCP/NCCP awareness and conservation values



Planning Agreement Public Comments (June 5–25, 2025)

- Purpose: Formal public review of draft Planning Agreement
- Required by NCCP Act



Who Responded

Community Survey

124 total responses; ~100 responses provided zip codes

West Sonoma dominated the responses (N=57),

- Especially **Forestville** (N=34) (Note local development project proposal influence)
- Other strong clusters: **Santa Rosa** (N=21), Sebastopol, Guerneville, Petaluma, Sonoma Valley
- Participation across North, South, Coast as well

Planning Agreement Comments

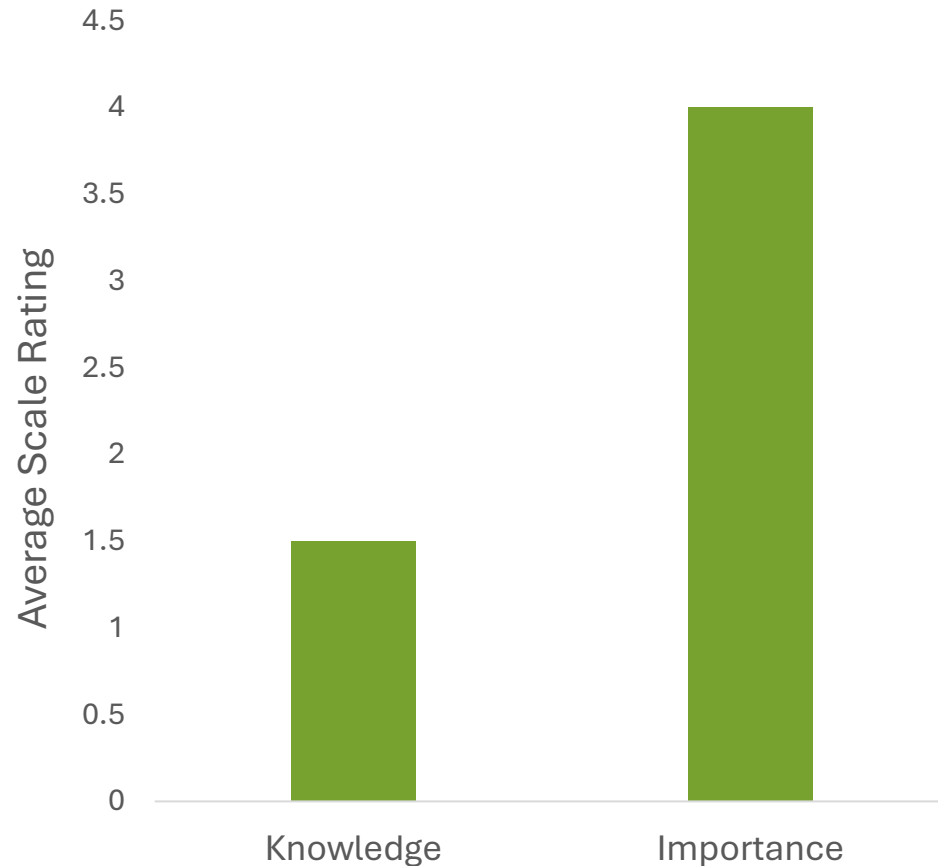
18 formal comments received

- Multiple coordinated form responses related to Forestville project
- Mix of individuals, organizations, and agencies



Knowledge vs. Importance Gap

People care, but don't know much (yet)



Knowledge

59% had low familiarity with HCP/NCCPs
(Avg Knowledge: 1.5 out of 5)

Importance

77% said the plan is important/very important
(Avg importance: 4 out of 5)

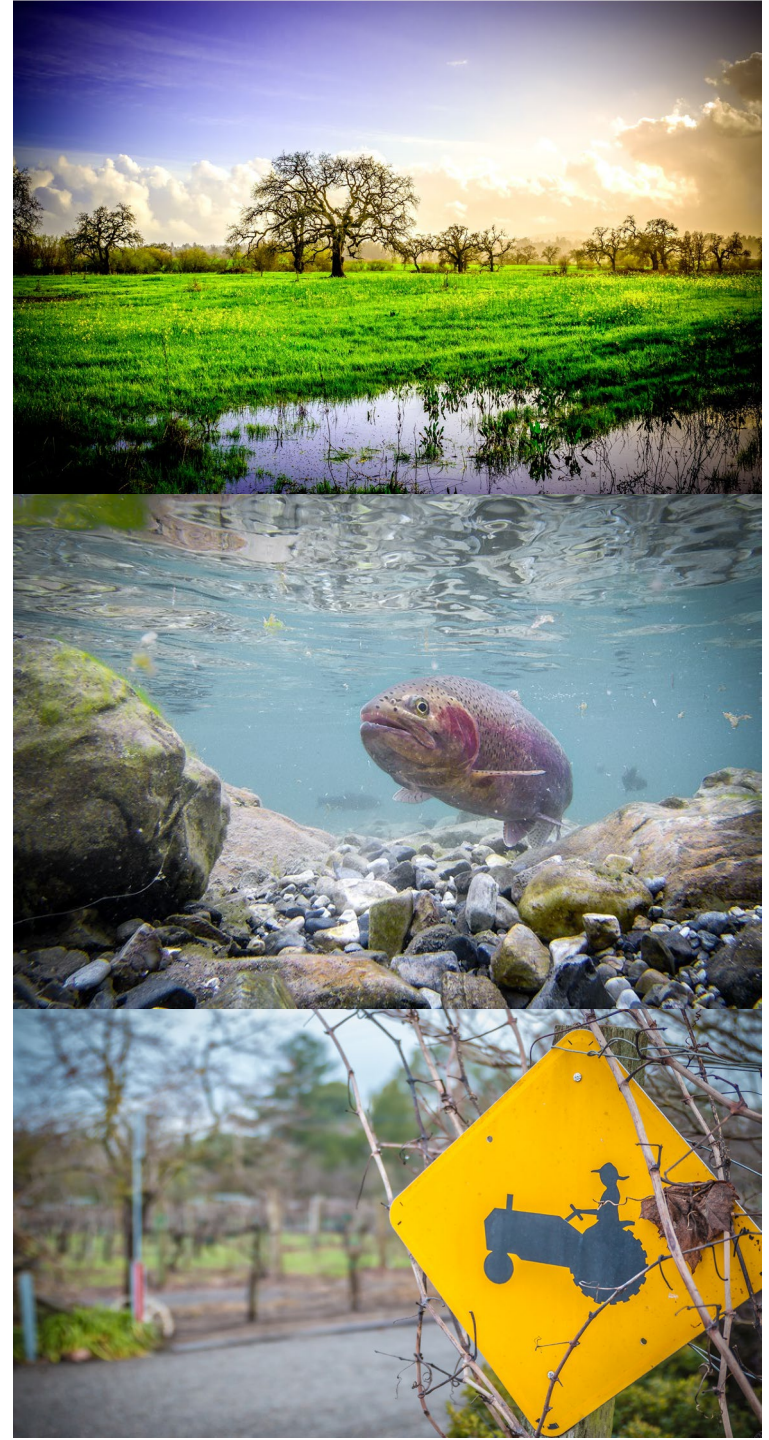
Conservation First

Top Priority: Protecting Nature

Protect **wildlife and habitats** (streams, wetlands, oak woodlands, etc.)

Salmon habitat and **rare plants** specifically highlighted

Conservation valued far above development streamlining (unchecked development concerns)





Land-Use Issues

Habitat loss from urban sprawl/development

Overuse of **water** resources

Pollution & climate **resilience**

Protect **farmland** from conversion

Invasive species related to industry/commercial activities

Process

Plan Development and Implementation



Process Matters: Who Decides, How, and When

Costs: who pays, and how much?

Implementation: will it deliver
meaningful conservation?

Monitoring: how will success be
measured and adjusted?

Fairness: who participates and
benefits?

Geographic Patterns



West: rivers, forests, community quality of life

Central/South: wetlands, oaks, growth pressure in Santa Rosa Plain & Petaluma

Sonoma Valley: oak woodlands, vineyard/land use tension

North: fairness for smaller towns, oak/forest conservation

Coast: salt marsh, dunes, invasive species

Ideas & Solutions

Community Suggestions for Moving Forward Together

Partnerships with landowners, Tribes, agencies, NGOs, academia, etc.

Expand trails and recreation **access tied to conservation**

Educational programs to build awareness

Green infrastructure, regenerative agriculture, **smart growth**

Practical measures: e.g., invasive species controls, science-based committees, protect rare species, navigating other regulatory processes



Summary and Next Steps

Community wants a science-based, transparent, conservation-driven plan

Support development that is balanced with conservation — not a fast-track tool for unchecked growth

What's Next?

- Feedback will shape the Draft HCP/NCCP and Implementing Agreement
- Ongoing opportunities for public input

PermitSonoma.org/ConservationSonoma

Community Questions on Sonoma County HCP/NCCP



Q:

Transparency
is important,
can a 90-day
written
comment
period for all
projects be
established?

- Approval and adoption of an HCP/NCCP **does not** approve any specific project
- An approved HCP/NCCP does not change the permittee's project approval process
- For NCCPs, FGC 2815 required public comment/review periods:
 - Draft NCCP documents considered for adoption – min 60-days prior to adoption
 - Preliminary public review documents – min 10 working days prior to public hearing
- Review periods may run concurrently with review period for any associated CEQA document

**Q: Does this
replace CEQA or
is this another
agency
approval?**

**And are there
additional fees
associated with
the plan?**

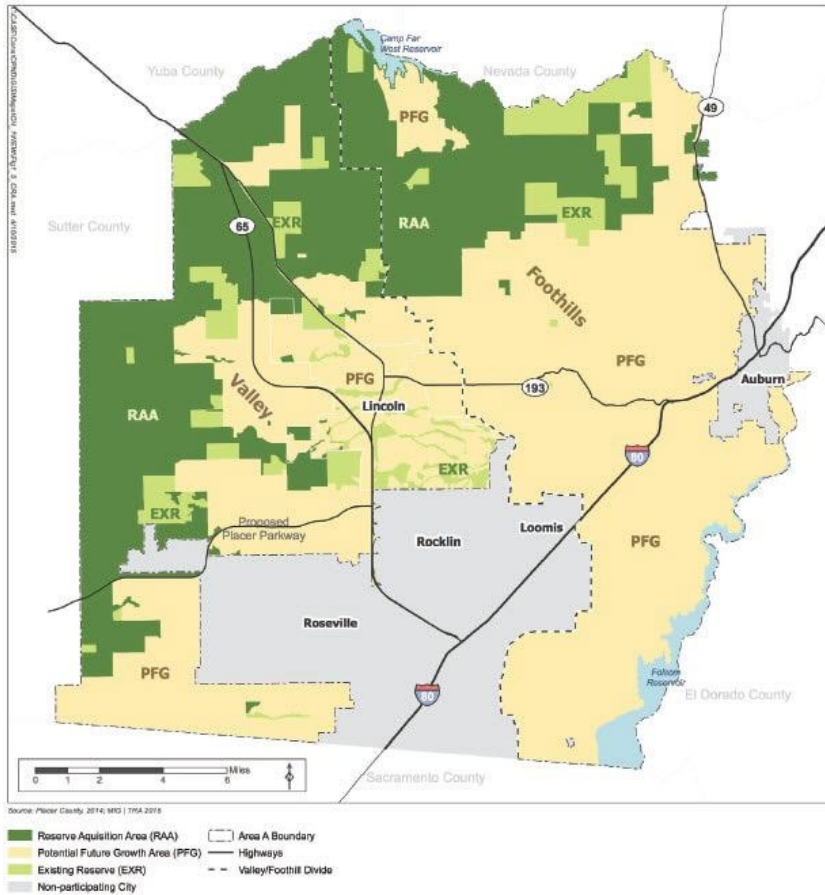
- Approval and adoption of an HCP/NCCP is subject to both NEPA and CEQA review
- An approved HCP/NCCP **does not** replace the CEQA review process for individual projects in the future
- Projects eligible to use the HCP/NCCP will pay fees into the plan to receive state and federal ITPs
- A cost and funding analysis will determine necessary and reasonable fees and fee schedule will be set by the plan

Cost and Funding: Development Fees

Plan	Approved	Plan Characteristics	2015 Development Fees (Per Acre)
East Contra Costa County HCP/NCCP	2008	30-year permit covers 28 species in 175,000-acre plan area	Infill: \$6,463 Ag, disturbed: \$12,926 Natural land: \$25,853
Santa Clara Valley HCP/NCCP 2025 fee schedule	2013	50-year permit covers 18 species in 525,000-acre plan area	Infill: \$4,561 Cultivated Ag: \$12,482 Natural land: \$18,004
Natomas Basin HCP 2025 fee schedule	2004	50-year permit covers 22 species over 55,000-acre plan area	All lands: \$32,259
San Joaquin County HCP	2001	50-year permit covers 75 species over 900,000-acre plan area	Open Space: \$7,281 Agriculture/Natural: \$14,543
Yolo HCP/NCCP 2025 fee schedule	2019	50-year permit covers 12 species in 650,000-acre plan area	Land cover: \$10,248

Q: Why are all cities not participating in the plan and how will that affect the plan?

- All local jurisdictions were approached about joining the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP as Co-Permittees
- Development of and participation as a Permittee in an HCP/NCCP is a voluntary action
- Outreach will continue to multiple entities as HCP/NCCP covered activities are identified
- Opportunity exists for specific projects or activities to be included through Certificate of Inclusion process



- Plan area includes western Placer County and specific conservation areas in neighboring Sutter County
- City of Lincoln is a co-permittee with Placer County
- Cities of Auburn, Loomis, Rocklin, and Roseville are not in the plan area
- Other co-permittees include Placer County Water Agency and South Placer Regional Transportation Authority

Placer County Conservation Program

Examples from Other Plans – PCCP

Q: Can anyone opt out of participating in the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP?

- Choosing to permit a project or activity through an HCP/NCCP is a voluntary action
- Seeking an Incidental Take Permit is a voluntary action
- Opting out of the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP does not mean that incidental take permits are not required
- Unauthorized take of a federal or state listed species is a violation of the ESA and CESA

Q: Will the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP increase the rate of development because it streamlines permits?

- The Sonoma County HCP/NCCP **does not add or reduce permitting requirements**, and development must be consistent with plan participants' General Plans
- Benefits include development that incorporates conservation on a regional scale
- The HCP/NCCP will have a maximum limit on the impacts allowed under the plan
- The HCP/NCCP will have a "stay ahead provision" that ensures impacts do not exceed conservation
- The Annual Report will track the rate of development and conservation

Figure 3. Covered Projects—Cumulative

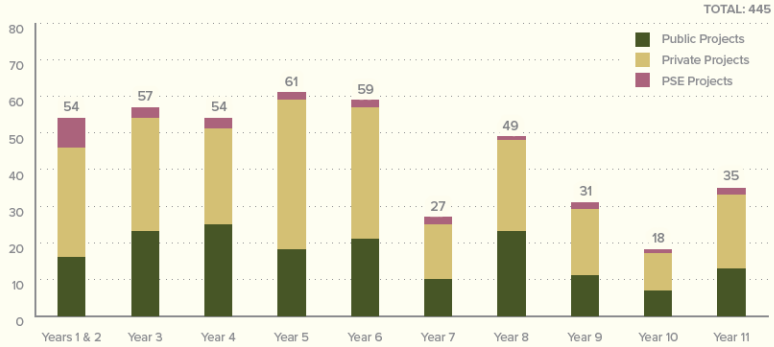
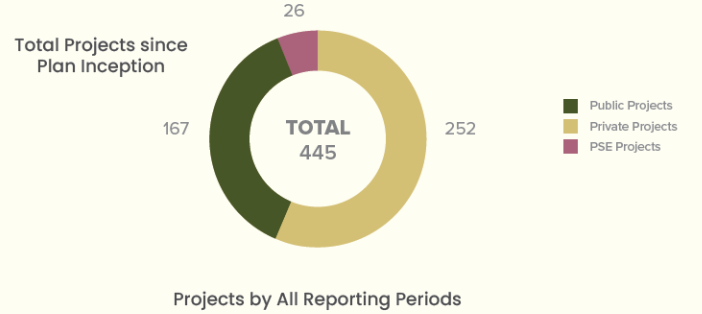


Figure 5. Covered Projects—Cumulative

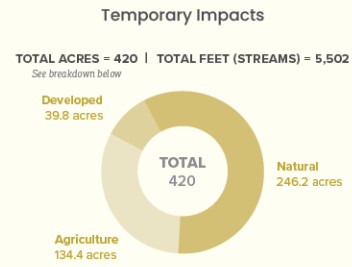
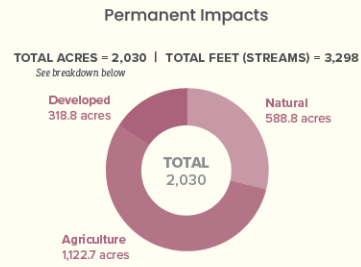
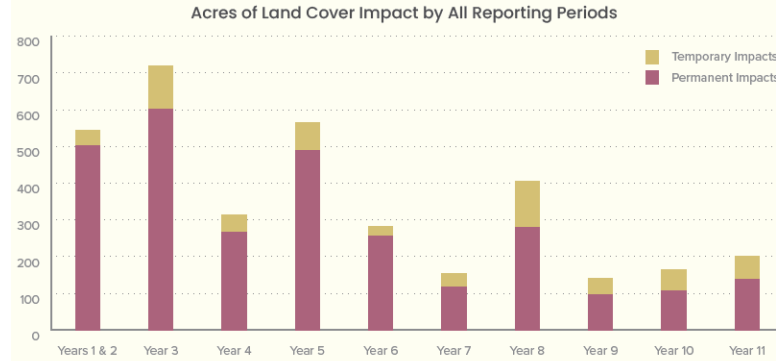


Figure 8. Cumulative Impacts Incurred and Preservation Achieved for Wildlife Habitat



Examples from Other Plans – SCVHCP

Figure 3. Land Cover Impacts by Land Cover Type—Cumulative

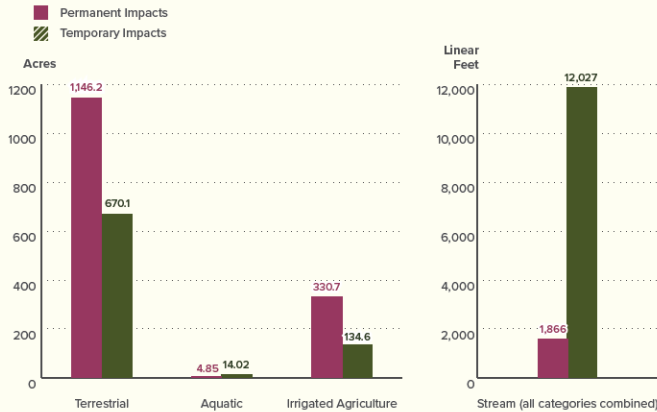


Figure 8. Comparison of Conservation Achieved to Impacts Incurred for Aquatic Land Cover Types and Streams—Cumulative

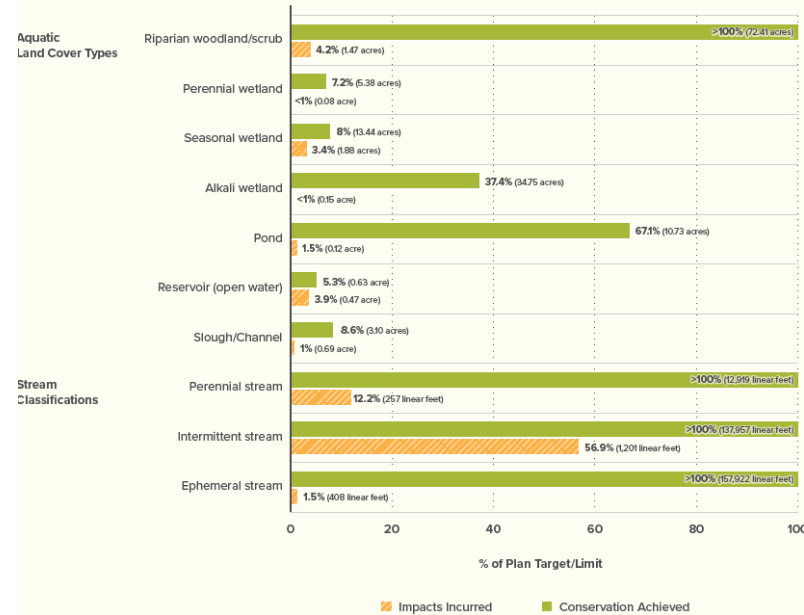
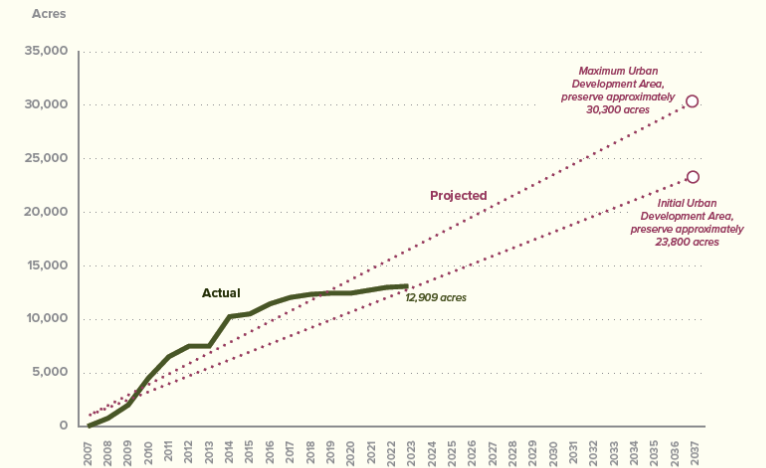


Figure 5. Progress toward Assembling the Preserve System



Examples from Other Plans – ECCC

Q: What is the involvement and selection of the science advisory committee?

- The NCCP Act (*California Fish and Game Code sections 2800–2840*) mandates the inclusion of **independent scientific analysis and input** in the NCCP process
- Not mandatory for HCPs but recommended for complex landscape level plans (*HCP Handbook, 2016*)
- Science Advisors:
 - Experts on local systems are best
 - Experts with practical knowledge are best
- Provide review and comment on science (not on policy)
- Wildlife agencies involved in selection of advisors

Overview of Process

- The ideal time to convene a panel is **after key initial decisions have been made** about the HCP/NCCP such as plan area, covered species, covered activities, permit term, and a framework for the conservation strategy.
- We want a **broad scientific advisory team**, including experts on the natural communities present, local ecosystem function, ecological requirements of species in the planning area, and conservation biology principles.



Overview of Process

- Selection criteria are developed based on previous experience and input from Conservation Sonoma participants and wildlife agencies.
- Professional scientists independent from the Conservation Sonoma and wildlife agencies are invited to participate.
- Conservation Sonoma selects the science advisors in collaboration with the wildlife agencies.
- A smaller group is likely to be more efficient.



Photo: John Greening

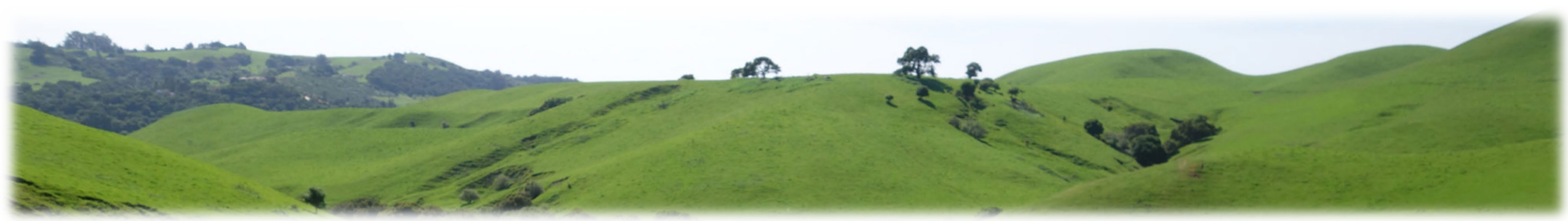
Overview of Process



- The panel is asked a set of questions, typically on the following topics:
 - Existing data, species and habitats
 - Conservation strategy
 - Land management and monitoring
 - Information gaps and uncertainties
- The questions are developed collaboratively by Conservation Sonoma and wildlife agencies.
- The advisors are not limited to answering only the questions asked.

Science Advisors Committee Format

- Typically, there is a multi-day workshop at the beginning of process. Part of this will be open to the public.
 - Field trips to key locations of plan
 - Presentations by County/consultant
 - Questions from science advisory panel
 - Public comment
- The panel is asked to provide scientific information and analysis, and expert opinion that will be used to inform the NCCP and HCP planning process.





Tasks of the Advisors

- Propose principles that will guide the conservation and recovery of covered species and natural communities.
- Assist with development of locally-relevant reserve design and landscape-level conservation principles.
- Identify potential for changed circumstances, e.g. large-scale fires, floods, drought, non-native species invasions, windstorms.



Tasks of the Advisors

- Advisors will issue a report to **inform development of the Sonoma County HCP/NCCP**.
- Conservation Sonoma participants decide whether or not to implement the outcomes of this process, however, there needs to be a **justified reason** if a recommendation is not implemented.

Q: Why were certain species not listed in the Planning Agreement (e.g., 1B.3 plants)?

- Both the ESA and NCCP Act require applicants to list the species for which take authorization is requested. This is commonly referred to as the covered species list.
- The proposed list of covered species will be developed by Conservation Sonoma with support and guidance from ICF, the wildlife agencies, the Science Advisors, the PAC, and other local experts.
- The selection of covered species is guided by specific criteria to provide a transparent, systematic, and repeatable process.

Covered Species

- The covered species list for the ESA Section 10 and NCCP Act Section 2835 permits may include both listed species and non-listed species that have the potential to become federally or state listed during the permit term
- To develop the covered species list, we use a three-step process:
 - Step 1. Identify potential covered species.
 - Step 2. Apply screening criteria.
 - Step 3. Review and finalize the proposed covered species list.
- The covered species are identified as “proposed” for coverage because they are not actually covered until the permits are issued by USFWS, NMFS, and CDFW
- Development of covered activities descriptions will help refine final covered species list
- Independent scientific expertise and regulatory agency expertise will help refine final covered species list

Covered Species Screening Criteria

- **Occurrence** – known to, or has potential to, occur in the plan area
- **Listing status** – needs to be listed or have an appreciable probability of becoming listed within the proposed permit term
- **Impact** – the covered activities are expected to result in take of the species
- **Data** - sufficient scientific data exist to evaluate impacts and develop conservation measures
- **Necessary and Efficient** – is there another pathway for take coverage? Will inclusion add substantial cost or complexity to plan development and/or implementation?

Draft List of Proposed Covered Species

Fish	Reptiles	Birds
Chinook salmon – CA coastal ESU	Northwestern pond turtle	Western burrowing owl
Coho salmon – central CA coast ESU	Invertebrates	Tricolored blackbird
Steelhead – central CA coast DPS	Western bumble bee	Marbled murrelet
	Crotch's bumble bee	Northern spotted owl
Amphibians	Monarch butterfly	
CA tiger salamander – Sonoma County DPS	California freshwater shrimp	Plants
Foothill yellow-legged frog – North Coast DPS	Mammals	Sonoma sunshine
California red-legged frog	Pallid bat	Burke's goldfields
	Salt-marsh harvest mouse	Sebastopol meadowfoam
	American badger	Many-flowered navarretia
		Two-fork clover

Q: How will the plan address critical habitat?

- Critical habitat is a federal designation, so it is not addressed as part of an NCCP
- Effects to critical habitat are analyzed as part of an ESA Section 7(a)(2) consultation on issuing a Section 10(a)(1)(B) permit
- Services cannot issue a permit that would jeopardize a listed species or destroy or adversely modify critical habitat



Questions and Discussion

Next Steps and Wrap Up

- Learn more: <https://permitsonoma.org/conservationsonoma>
- Subscribe to mailing list
 - ✓(bottom of website homepage)
- Social media updates: Permit Sonoma
- General questions or additional information: contact ConservationSonoma@sonomacounty.gov



Website QR Code

