

A Review of Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District:

It's On Their Website!

SUMMARY

Citizen interest prompted the 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to investigate how, and how well, the Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (Ag+OS) is fulfilling its voter-approved mission.

Preservation of agricultural lands and open space has been a consideration of Sonoma County planners since the 1978 General Plan. It became a major focus of the 1989 General Plan. On November 6, 1990, Sonoma County voters passed Measures A and C that established Ag+OS as a dependent special district, overseen by the Board of Supervisors, and established a 0.25 percent sales tax for a period of 20 years to purchase property and conservation easements. Measure C specified that funds would be used to preserve:

- Community separators
- Scenic landscapes
- Critical habitats and riparian corridors
- Other areas of biotic significance
- Other open space areas

On November 7, 2006, more than 75% of voters chose to extend Ag+OS funding for another 20 years.

Over the past 35 years, Ag+OS has acquired and stewarded property and conservation easements valued at more than \$600 million to pursue its mission of conserving Sonoma County agricultural lands and open space in perpetuity. Many of these properties bear little or no identification of the Ag+OS role in their protection. This may lead to the public being unaware of the extent of Ag+OS acquisitions. The Grand Jury sought answers to questions that any tax-paying citizen might well ask. Among the

questions the Grand Jury sought to answer were several raised by members of the public:

- Is Ag+OS accomplishing what the voters approved?
- Can we be confident that Ag+OS negotiates a fair price and invests our taxes wisely?
- What added protection does Ag+OS provide compared to existing zoning and land use ordinances?

This report answers these questions and several others, based on multiple interviews and review of documents, including material that is readily available on the Ag+OS website. In it, the Grand Jury describes the process through which staff and the Ag+OS Board of Directors has established selection criteria for projects to implement the voter-approved Expenditure Plan, and the Geographic Information System (GIS)-based process through which properties are evaluated for fee title purchase or establishment of conservation easements. The report also details the rigorous appraisal process which becomes the basis for price negotiation and informs ultimate decision-making by the Board of Directors.

The Grand Jury found that Ag+OS has aligned its work closely with the Expenditure Plans approved by voters. To date, it has protected and continues to provide stewardship for more than 126,000 acres, about 12% of the county lands. Every resident and visitor to Sonoma County benefits from these acquisitions through green belts and community separators, healthy watersheds and riparian areas, parklands, playing fields, and agricultural uses that provide local produce, dairy, meat, and fiber.

The value to taxpayers is ensured both by the science-based identification of properties closely aligned with voter-approved objectives and by the rigorous appraisal process, with internal review by the Fiscal Oversight Commission (FOC). Approval by the Board of Directors is required prior to release of funds. Tax dollars are also leveraged for initial acquisitions of Community Spaces projects by grants and gifts, increasing the available funding by about 35%.

Taxpayer investment in Ag+OS will continue to pay dividends to future generations through conservation easements that are protected in perpetuity by state law. While

county and city general plans and zoning ordinances can be changed by successive governments, conservation easements are protected by law for permanent stewardship.

While Ag+OS stands alone as Sonoma County's only tax-funded open space preservation entity, it has forged numerous partnerships that support its mission. Sonoma County Regional Parks and Sonoma Land Trust are frequent collaborators with Ag+OS. Together with other public and private agencies, they have established the Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative, a partnership aimed at maintaining and improving ecosystem health and increasing resilience to wildfires and climate change.

In 2022 Ag+OS formed a coalition with Sonoma Water, the North Coast Resource Partnership, Humboldt County, as well as other state and local agencies to secure funding for the collection of light detection and ranging (LiDAR) images that make up the Sonoma Vegetation Map. The images have enhanced the GIS that Ag+OS uses to evaluate and analyze properties. This GIS is also used by Sonoma Emergency Management to help prepare for, and mitigate, the impact of disasters. The plan, which is undergoing an update, and maps can be viewed by visiting [Sonoma County Hazard Mitigation Plan](#) and selecting Hazard Mapper.

The collegiality reflected in these regional partnerships was also evident to the Grand Jury during its interviews with Ag+OS and Regional Parks staff. Every individual demonstrated a commitment to the organization's mission. Throughout these organizations there is a deep sense of responsibility to give the voters of Sonoma County the absolute best value for their money by preserving the land for future generations to enjoy.

BACKGROUND

History and Timeline

Preservation of agricultural lands and open space has been a consideration since the earliest Sonoma County General Plans. It became a major focus of the 1989 General Plan. This brief history and timeline omits details which may be of interest and are readily available [to view on the Ag+OS website.](#)

On November 6, 1990, voters passed two Measures that were placed on the ballot to implement the 1989 General Plan: 1) Measure A established the Agricultural and Open Space Preservation District as a dependent special district with the County Board of Supervisors (BOS) serving as its Board of Directors (BOD); 2) Measure C established a 0.25 percent sales tax for a period of 20 years with an annual appropriation limit of \$40 million. The Sonoma Open Space Authority was established to receive and distribute the funds, to be used according to a five-point Expenditure Plan to purchase property and conservation easements to preserve:

- Community separators
- Scenic landscapes
- Critical habitats and riparian corridors
- Other areas of biotic significance
- Other open space areas

On November 7, 2006, [Measure F, which can be viewed here](#), extended the original term for another 20 years, with funding to sunset in March 2031. More than 75% of voters approved The Sonoma County Open Space, Clean Water, and Farmland Protection Measure. The revised [Expenditure Plan \(available to view here\)](#) increased the emphasis on protecting the county's agricultural resources and creating spaces for public use and recreation:

- Community separators and greenbelts
- Scenic landscape units and scenic corridors
- Agriculturally productive lands
- Biotic habitat areas, riparian corridors and other areas of biotic significance
- Other open space projects
- Operation and maintenance of land

In 2011, in accordance with Measure F, The Sonoma Open Space Authority was reorganized into the FOC with a well-defined set of responsibilities. Functioning as an audit committee, the FOC reviews all Ag+OS expenditures, procurement practices, and annual audits, as well as all proposed acquisitions to protect against overpaying. The

Fiscal Oversight Committee also reports annually to the BOD, which makes final decisions on all expenditures.

In 2021 the [Vital Lands Initiative \(VLI\) \(view here\)](#) was submitted by staff and approved by the BOD to further define priorities and criteria for Ag+OS investments. The VLI is a long-term strategic plan which refocuses Ag+OS priorities based on extensive staff and public input. It incorporates strict science-based criteria to help determine a property's conservation value. The VLI outlines how Ag+OS prioritizes conservation of Sonoma County's agricultural lands, scenic viewsheds and greenbelt areas, and land for recreation, education, and urban open space within communities.

Organization and Staffing

Governing & Advisory Bodies

The Ag+OS General Manager reports directly to the BOD and is responsible for approving all decisions related to the Expenditure Plan. When the BOS meets as the Ag+OS BOD their meetings are noticed on the BOS website. However, they are not linked as public meeting announcements on the Ag+OS website.

Leadership & Management

The Ag+OS staff consists of specialized teams focused on land acquisition, stewardship, and community resources to steward and protect over 126,000 acres. The General Manager has a staff of 36.5 full time employees, five of whom are direct report department managers. These include four permanent managers: an Administrative & Fiscal Services Manager, a Community Resources Manager, a Stewardship Manager, and an Acquisition Manager. There is also a Vegetation Management Coordinator whose temporary position is funded by the county's PG&E wildfire settlement.

The Fiscal Oversight Commission

Made up of five members and an alternate appointed by the Board of Directors, the FOC provides independent fiscal oversight for Ag+OS operations by:

- Serving as an audit committee and reviewing each proposed acquisition or conveyance of interest in real property

- Reviewing any borrowing transaction for compliance
- Reviewing the annual audit
- Reviewing operations and maintenance, and procurement practices
- Reviewing internal financial records of the Open Space Special Tax Account (OSSTA)

OSSTA is managed by the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector (ACTTC). It is where Ag+OS monies are collected, held, and distributed separately from other county funds. The FOC makes an annual report to the Ag+OS Board of Directors. Fourteen years of budgets and audits for Ag+OS are available to view [here](#) on their website.

The Advisory Committee (Committee)

The Committee offers opinions and makes recommendations at the request of the Ag+OS Board of Directors or its General Manager. The 19 Members represent specific constituent groups and are selected as follows:

- Two appointed by each County Supervisor (10)
- Three representatives from the Mayors' and Councilmembers' Association (3)
- Two youth members (2)
- One each representing agriculture, the environment, real estate or property appraisal, and business (4)

While solely advisory, The Committee provides broad-based citizen input on Ag+OS activities. Members act as ambassadors to the community and are appointed by the BOD; [information on how to apply is available to view here](#).

METHODOLOGY

The 2025-2026 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury:

- Conducted interviews with Ag+OS and Sonoma Regional Parks staff
- Reviewed dozens of documents verifying the evaluation and appraisal processes for Ag+OS acquisitions

- Observed public meetings of the Ag+OS Advisory Board and Fiscal Oversight Commission

DISCUSSION

How are properties selected for purchase and/or establishment of conservation easements?

Ag+OS only works with willing sellers. Fee title purchases of land are rare. Most property owners apply to work with Ag+OS to protect their land through the sale of a conservation easement which forever limits the way the land can be used. Unlike county codes and zoning ordinances, conservation easements are permanent, enforceable by state law, and cannot be changed to be less restrictive. In essence, a property owner sells their development rights to Ag+OS, reducing the market value of the property.

The process, which can easily take a year or more to complete, begins when a landowner reaches out to Ag+OS. Perhaps a longtime farmer or rancher has no interested heirs to take over the family operation, or maybe someone who lives in an area of increasing development would like to ensure their corner of Sonoma County is left untouched. In some cases a conservation easement may reduce property tax liability. In any case, the conversation begins by learning what goals the landowner has for the property and what conservation value the property offers. Once an application is submitted, it is evaluated to determine which VLI goals the property meets and how it might benefit the public.

How is the conservation value of an easement evaluated?

The next step is to start an analysis of the property. Ag+OS staff have developed GIS maps to strengthen their ability to advance the mission of permanently protecting Sonoma County's diverse agricultural lands, natural resources, and scenic open spaces for future generations. Central to this effort is the creation of a comprehensive dataset from which the maps are created.

The GIS data and mapping comprises 133 layers, each one providing information about features such as soil composition, water availability, vegetation, and population density, just to name a few. A suite of more than 20 maps, called the Vital Lands Analysis, is

produced for each proposed property and is an essential part of the science-based decision-making process. Before GIS was implemented, this work would take days of staff time. The compilation of this data now happens within hours of intaking a property.

Evaluation using the Vital Lands Matrix rating tool is the second part of the process. The various goals of VLI are broken down into more discrete categories and the property is then scored on how well it meets each of these criteria. Using the Vital Lands Analysis, attributes of the land are scored on how they fit with VLI goals. Scores are adjusted up for properties that meet multiple goals and there is a minimum score required for a project to progress. Together, the Vital Lands Analysis and the Vital Lands Matrix form the science-based backbone of Ag+OS' conservation easement acquisitions. A property evaluation meeting is then held for staff to review the accumulated data and decide whether to recommend it to the General Manager for advancement to the appraisal phase. Not every property that scores well advances through the program. Input from staff specialists, such as hydrologists or botanists, is of particular importance during this phase. The General Manager has the final say on whether to activate a project for further consideration.

Can we be confident that Ag+OS negotiates a fair price and invests our taxes wisely?

All real estate transactions begin with a fair appraisal of the property in question. Ag+OS has a list of vetted appraisers and issues a request for proposal for each project. After proposals are received, Ag+OS staff review them to determine which vendor is a good fit for the project based on their area of expertise and ability to complete the work within an accepted timeline.

All appraisals regarding finalized transactions are public record. Jurors reviewed appraisals for two completed transactions. The first was for a fee title property (River Lane in Guerneville). The second was for a conservation easement (McClelland Dairy in Petaluma). The first step is the same in either case; the appraiser seeks out comparable properties. Adjustments are then made to include a variety of factors like location, acreage, shape of the property, site improvements, topography, utilities, and allowable development under current zoning. A final opinion of market value of the property is

determined and this value represents the property's highest and best use. That value is crucial because it represents the maximum that Ag+OS can pay for an outright purchase.

If the project involves acquisition of a conservation easement, a second step is necessary and another set of adjustments to value are made, accounting for the potential restrictions with which the conservation easement would burden the property. Adjustments might include zoning changes (which can substantially reduce or eliminate the potential for future development of the parcels); changes to the number of legal parcels the property is divided into; possible public use in the future of all or a portion of the property; and impacts on current farming operations. The adjustments are detailed in the appraisal report and help determine a final opinion of value of the subject property after encumbrance with the conservation easement.

At this point the estimated value after the conservation easement is subtracted from the estimated value before the conservation easement. The difference between those two numbers gives the Concluded Impact on Value of Conservation Easement (Impact Value). It is important to stress that Impact Value forms the ceiling price that Ag+OS can pay to conclude this transaction. If a price can be successfully negotiated at or below the Impact Value of the easement, then the transaction can continue.

In the case of the appraisal for the McClelland Dairy property the values worked out as follows:

Value without conservation easement:	\$5,570,000
Estimated value after easement in place:	<u>(\$2,960,000)</u>
Impact Value:	\$2,610,000

A second appraiser is then engaged to review the report and either confirm its conclusion or recommends modifications. Staff can now begin negotiating with the landowner using the Impact Value as their maximum allowable price.

After a price has been agreed to, Ag+OS staff prepare a presentation for the Fiscal Oversight Commission. The FOC does not have final authority to approve or deny the

proposed transaction, but they do review all the project documents including maps, VLA, VLM, appraisals, and the conservation easement document. Review by the FOC is the penultimate step in the rigorous process that Ag+OS completes for every property transaction it undertakes. The final decision to approve or reject the project lies with the Ag+OS Board of Directors (Sonoma County Board of Supervisors).

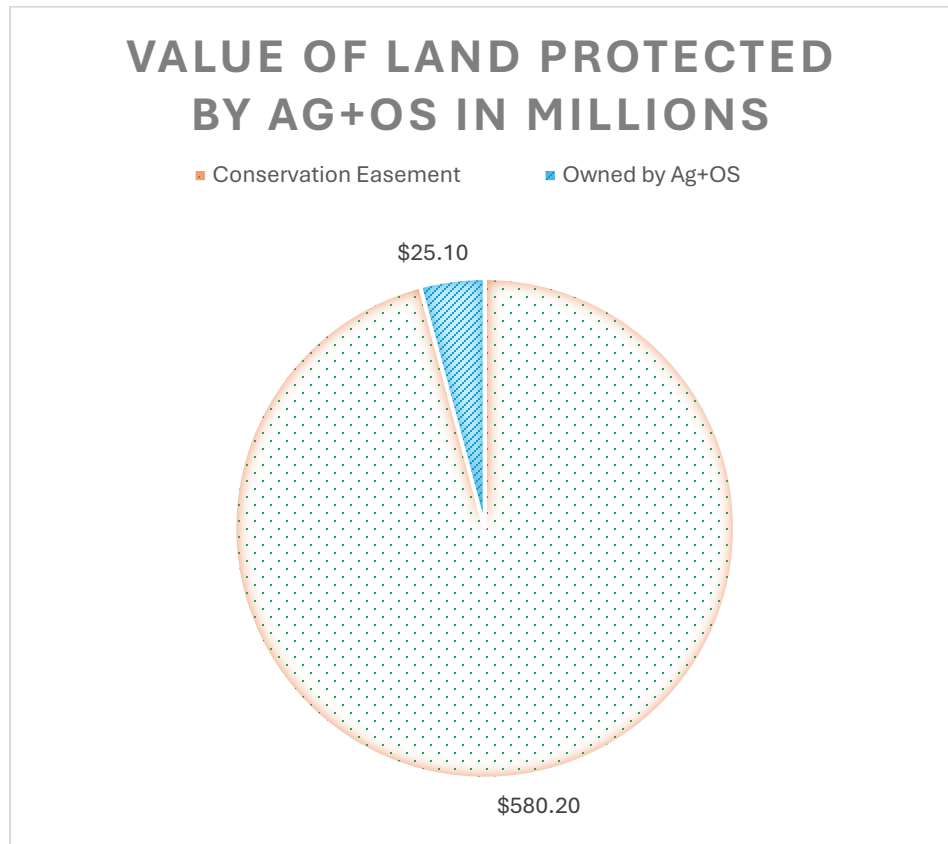


FIGURE 1. 95% OF THE LAND VALUE PROTECTED BY AG+OS IS IN CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

The graph above reflects an ongoing Ag+OS policy that is worth specific mention. As previously described, there are two main ways Ag+OS uses land acquisition to perform its preservation work: fee title transactions (acquiring outright ownership of land) and the purchase of conservation easements. Conservation easements are Ag+OS' most cost-effective tool when weighed against the expense of oversight, maintenance and operations, and complexities of owning land in Sonoma County. Conservation easements yield the necessary protection sought by Ag+OS and are more financially feasible than becoming owners of more and more property. Where fee title acquisition is the only option for a particular transaction, it is intended that this ownership will

ultimately be transferred. On all such purchases a conservation easement and recreation covenant, if applicable, are recorded before the land is conveyed (to Regional Parks, for example) or sold so that Ag+OS has still met its obligation to protect the land.

What added protection does Ag+OS provide compared to existing zoning and land use ordinances?

The General Plan and zoning ordinances can be changed by city and county governments as they see fit to meet the current needs of the broader community, and the community must abide by them. Changes to a code or ordinance which a council or board makes this year might be reversed by a newly elected body. On the other hand, conservation easements are permanent, voluntary agreements between a willing landowner and Ag+OS which are protected and enforceable by California State law. Additionally, mandatory stewardship of the easement provides a consistent level of monitoring oversight unmatched by local codes and ordinances. The voluntary nature of the agreement allows for far more restrictive limits than city or county codes can enforce.

Once established, a conservation easement binds the landowner, and all future owners of that land, to abide by the restrictions set forth. The restrictions aim to protect and preserve the property, and its natural resources, as is. When written, each easement is tailored to the property it will protect. For example, a creek side property may contain protections for riparian habitat and oak wildland preservation. Some easements have specific language outlining protections for native or at-risk species found there.

While the easement is permanent, it can be altered but only if it preserves or increases the current level of protection. There is a well-designed process for landowners to apply for changes to their conservation easements. Certain small changes are allowable provided the owner promptly notifies Ag+OS. Some amendments require the landowner to secure Ag+OS permission. A conservation easement can never be adjusted to be less restrictive or protective.

There are guidelines in each document outlining the handling of potential violations, ranging from corrective action as a recovery path for a minor violation, mediation, or arbitration for more serious violations, all the way to the courts, if needed. California's open space laws are codified in Civil Code [§ 815 \(view here\)](#) and are overseen by the state Attorney General's Office. As one interviewee explained to us, the conservation easements written by Ag+OS "are dedicated to open space under state law. They are perpetual in nature. They can only be rescinded by a vote of the people or an act of legislature."

What does "Protected Forever" mean?

In the simplest terms, the landowner is voluntarily selling their rights to develop the land to Ag+OS and agreeing to restrict how they will use it. In return, Ag+OS pays the landowner for those rights and becomes a permanent stewardship partner, monitoring the easement forever. During our interviews with the staff, jurors noted the repeated mention of Ag+OS working to build relationships with the conservation easement landowners. Ag+OS continues to work with landowners after the conservation easement has been written, to ensure that the landowner is meeting their obligations of conservation.

Any new owner, whether purchaser or heir, is encumbered by the conservation easement. The landowner is required to notify Ag+OS if the land is sold so the work of monitoring the easements can continue, uninterrupted. This could be a weakness in the process as there is no automatic notification to Ag+OS by the Recorder's Office when property changes hands. Not every owner makes timely notification, and new owners may not fully understand their obligations.

With approximately 300 easements, the monitoring work can be daunting. Ag+OS experienced a backlog of monitoring visits after unavoidable complications created by years of wildfire, followed by COVID restrictions. The goal of the stewardship department has been on-site monitoring of each easement every 18 months. However, Ag+OS has recently adopted a new policy that allows them to use fine scale satellite imagery for their 18-month monitoring. This allows for effective, efficient, remote monitoring by stewardship staff. The new policy is aligned with methods endorsed by

the Land Trust Alliance, a nonprofit organization that sets standards for conservation entities and land trusts nationwide. The frequency of site visits has now been shifted to every three to five years.

How is “Protected Forever” funded?

The stewardship work will never stop, but the special tax funding source might. The current ballot measure will sunset in 2031 but Ag+OS will still have an obligation to protect our valuable natural lands and resources. To this end, Ag+OS has been depositing a portion of the special tax money into a Stewardship Reserve Fund that will finance the mandatory, perpetual work of monitoring conservation easements. The Stewardship Reserve Fund is managed by ACTTC alongside other county funds. ACTTC prioritizes short term liquidity for its investments and the returns are lower than can be achieved via longer term investment strategies, such as those realized by the Sonoma County Employees’ Retirement Association. Currently, the funds are not optimally invested to ensure adequate funding forever. Due to the structure of Ag+OS as a dependent special district of the county, there is a need for specialized investment guidance. The staff has taken steps to engage investment advisory services for this purpose.

Has Ag+OS accomplished what the voters wanted, and who benefits from their work?

Ag+OS has aligned its work closely with the Expenditure Plans approved by Sonoma County voters. Every Sonoma County resident and visitor benefits from the work of Ag+OS, either directly or indirectly. Ag+OS has protected 126,000 acres, or roughly 12% of the county, and these lands perform vital functions for us all.

Since the inception of Ag+OS, creation and maintenance of community separators and green belts have been a priority. The beauty of our county has an inherent value as well as a practical value. The protected spaces between our populated areas help deter urban sprawl and minimize the impacts of heat islands. These areas are also some of our most recognizable landscapes, providing scenic corridors between and among our

population centers. Each Sonoma County city has a distinct character that is preserved, in part, by the spaces between neighboring communities.

Our communities have been rooted in agriculture and their identities are often tied to historic crops and products. The investment that Ag+OS makes in agricultural land helps support our county's economy and our access to local products like fresh produce, meat, eggs, dairy, and fiber. Additionally, agricultural open spaces, like grazing lands, are opportunities for groundwater recharge, helping us to maintain a healthy water supply.

Conservation of riparian corridors supports healthy waterways and provides habitat for our diverse wildlife. Healthy watersheds are also supported by riparian corridor conservation. The ability of these waterways and their surrounds to absorb and release rainwater in efficient ways is vital to mitigating catastrophic flooding. Some of the conservation easements Ag+OS holds are specifically targeted to riparian areas. More than 144 miles of Coho and Steelhead salmonid habitat has been conserved so far. Connected, conserved lands are a goal for Ag+OS. [These protected lands \(view a map here\)](#) are habitats for a multitude of beneficial species of animals and plants, some of which are unique to Sonoma County.

Most of the land protected through conservation easements is not accessible to the general public but a few of the properties can be enjoyed through public outings offered by Ag+OS and its partners, and many of their educational programs take place on these lands. In 2025, more than 5,000 individuals participated in the public outings offered by Ag+OS, and more than 14,000 students were served by their educational programs.

The category of Other Open Space Projects listed in the 2006 Expenditure Plan includes many of the acquisitions most familiar to, and most valued by, Sonoma County residents. Approximately 50% of the land we now access as Sonoma County Regional Parks was originally acquired by Ag+OS and then transferred for management by Regional Parks. When the property is transferred, Ag+OS retains not only a conservation easement, but usually a recreation covenant as well. This requires that the land be permanently protected and kept open to the public for recreational use.

In a recent application of its GIS technology, Ag+OS has worked with Regional Parks to develop a Park Gap Analysis to better understand what publicly accessible space exists and where new projects or improvements would expand opportunities for outdoor activity by people with a wide range of interests and abilities. The Expenditure Plan also allows Ag+OS to invest up to 10% of its revenue to provide initial public access to newly opened areas. Funding for interim parking or trail improvements gets people out on the land more quickly.

Many other publicly accessible open space projects throughout the county are the result of Ag+OS Community Spaces matching grants program, which can be [viewed here](#). The program provides a portion of necessary funding for projects initiated by city governments, county agencies, and unincorporated communities throughout the county.

As illustrated in the graph below, an acquisition funding commitment by Ag+OS draws matching funds of approximately one a dollar for every two it contributes to a Community Spaces project. Projects include city parks, town squares, creek restorations, soccer/playing fields, and community gardens. [You can explore the map of these projects here](#).



FIGURE 2 COMMUNITY SPACES PROJECTS RECEIVE ROUGHLY 65% OF THEIR ACQUISITION FUNDING FROM AG+OS AND 35% FROM COMMUNITY PARTNERS

What has made this organization so effective?

Ag+OS is an organization with a strictly defined scope and a prescribed Expenditure Plan. They are dedicated to their mission but must be selective with their limited resources. To accomplish these goals, Ag+OS has evolved its methods to ensure that taxpayers are getting excellent value for their money. Ag+OS stands alone as Sonoma's only taxpayer-funded open space preservation entity, but they have numerous partners in their mission.

Sonoma County Regional Parks and Sonoma Land Trust are two organizations that are frequent collaborators with Ag+OS. All three have a deep commitment to open space and the benefits it provides, and they work cooperatively to accomplish their common goals. Together, with public and private agencies in the land conservation and management sectors, they established the [Sonoma Valley Wildlands Collaborative \(view here\)](#) a partnership aimed at maintaining and improving ecosystem health and increasing resilience to wildfires and climate change.

Climate resilience benefits all of us. In 2022 Ag+OS formed a coalition with Sonoma Water and the North Coast Resource Partnership to secure funding for the collection of light detection and ranging (LiDAR) images that make up the [Sonoma Vegetation Map \(VegMap available to view here\)](#). The VegMap can be used as a conservation planning tool monitoring vegetation, carbon, and the hydrology of our landscape. The LiDAR-enhanced images have strengthened the GIS that Ag+OS uses to evaluate and analyze properties. Funding and cooperation for the VegMap involved broad collaboration among several organizations, including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, the University of Maryland, and NASA. That GIS is also used by Sonoma Emergency Management to help prepare for and mitigate the impact of disasters.

There were some common threads to the interviews conducted by the Grand Jury during this investigation. Every individual we interviewed demonstrated a commitment to the cause of preserving open space; a dedication to providing Sonoma County voters

with the best value for their tax dollars; and expertise in their chosen fields. Jurors were impressed by the professionalism and knowledge of the staff of Ag+OS and the passion they have for their voter-approved mission. They find the work fulfilling and deeply meaningful. Every interviewee was enthusiastic about their area of expertise and the opportunity to discuss their crucial work. Throughout Ag+OS there is a sense of responsibility to give the voters of Sonoma County the absolute best value for their money by preserving the land for future generations to enjoy.



FIGURE 3 PARTNERSHIP SIGNAGE AT SONOMA MOUNTAIN VERNAL POOLS

What work remains to be done?

The voter-approved Measure F funding will sunset in 2031. If voters approve another measure to continue the sales tax, Ag+OS will continue to buy conservation easements and further protect our agricultural lands and open space, helping Sonoma continue to build climate resilience. They would provide more matching grants and make more open spaces available to the public. They would also be positioned to bolster the Stewardship Fund that is required to perpetually steward and monitor all the lands they have protected.

FINDINGS

F1. Public meetings of the Ag+OS Board of Directors are publicly noticed by the County as Board of Supervisors meetings but do not appear on the Ag+OS website listing of public meetings. This may leave interested members of the public uninformed of the meetings.

F2. The Stewardship Reserve Fund is currently invested at the County's highly conservative low rate of return. This may be insufficient to meet the long-term goal of providing stewardship in perpetuity.

F3. The Recorder's Office does not notify Ag+OS when ownership of a protected property changes. This may impair Ag+OS stewardship of a conservation easement.

F4. Because many properties are not physically identified on site as protected by Ag+OS, members of the public may not be aware of what has been accomplished with their tax dollars.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. By August 1, 2026 the Ag+OS Board of Directors/Board of Supervisors direct Ag+OS staff to include notification of Board of Directors meetings, with a link to the agenda, in the location established on its website for Public Meeting announcements.

(F1)

R2. By August 1, 2026 the Board of Supervisors direct the Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector and the Administrator of the Sonoma County Employees' Retirement Association Investment Managers to collaborate in pursuing a higher rate of return on the Ag+OS Stewardship Reserve Fund and report their recommendations to the Board of Directors by December 31, 2026. (F2)

R3. By August 1, 2026 the Board of Supervisors direct the Recorder's Office to flag properties under Ag+OS Stewardship and create a system to notify Ag+OS of changes in ownership within 30 days of recording. (F3)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

From the following governing boards within 90 days:

- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (R2, R3, F2, F3)
- Ag+OS Board of Directors (R1, F1)

INVITED RESPONSES

Responses are invited from the following within 90 days:

- General Manager of Ag+OS with a copy to the County Executive Officer (R1, R2, R3, F1, F2, F3)

GLOSSARY

Concluded Impact on Value of a Conservation Easement (Impact Value), is the dollar value of a conservation easement, determined by the difference between the appraised value of land before and after establishment of the conservation easement's restrictions.

Conservation Easement is a power vested in a nonprofit or a governmental entity to restrict the exercise of rights otherwise held by a landowner so as to achieve certain conservation purposes.

Dependent Special District is a limited-purpose local government unit closely tied to another unit of local government.

Geographic Information System (GIS) is a computer-based conceptualized framework used for organizing and analyzing data related to positions on Earth's surface.

Recreation Covenant is a legally binding agreement that mandates land be open for the public to be used for recreational purposes.

Vital Lands Analysis (VLA) is the suite of maps used to evaluate a property's alignment with various Vital Lands Initiative goals.

Vital Lands Initiative (VLI) is a long-range comprehensive plan to prioritize the land conservation activities of Ag+OS through 2031. The full report is available [here](#).

Vital Lands Matrix (VLM) is the science-based scoring matrix used to evaluate how well a property meets Vital Lands Initiative goals.



FIGURE 4 A WHIMSICAL SCULPTURE PORTRAYING A COW AND A CHICKEN ON A TRACTOR, BY PATRICK AMIOT

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.