



**AG + OPEN SPACE**  
SONOMA COUNTY



**RESOURCE**  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT  
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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## **Our Open Spaces Provide Us with Benefits Valued up to \$12.6 Billion**

### ***Healthy Lands Healthy & Economies Initiative Identifies and Values the Natural Assets of Three Bay Area Counties***

**Bay Area, Calif. (November 13, 2018)** – The value of sweeping open space, working lands, and a thriving natural world can be difficult to place a numerical value on, but a collaboration between the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County, and Sonoma County Ag + Open Space has done just that by estimating the monetary value of our soil, water, air, plants, and animals – in other words, our ‘natural capital.’

Today, the Healthy Lands & Healthy Economies (HLHE) Initiative released the first-ever Bay Area regional report describing the economic value and community benefits of the natural and working landscapes located in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma counties. Protecting natural areas has a very real, tangible effect on our local and regional economies and the health of our communities.

Funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, and the California State Coastal Conservancy, the HLHE Initiative calculates ecosystem services provided by natural and working lands to demonstrate how investments in land conservation contribute to the local economy and provide cost effective alternatives to traditional built infrastructure while achieving a variety of community benefits.

Natural and working landscapes in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma Counties provide a variety of services and benefits to our communities, including clean air, fresh water, storm and flood protection, food and fiber materials, carbon sequestration, recreation, public health benefits, and many others.

For example, streams and other water filtered by nature can be consumed as drinking water with minimal treatment, while poor quality or polluted waters must go through a much more costly and time-consuming process before becoming potable. Protecting our watersheds saves money, time, and resources.

The natural capital of these lands has been monetized by economists using what’s known as “the benefit transfer method,” commonly used to understand how our natural environment contributes to our overall economic well-being, while answering questions about the “return on investment” in conservation.

To date, 241,000 acres of open space have been safeguarded in Santa Clara County, 37 percent of Santa Cruz County is protected in perpetuity, and Sonoma County Ag + Open Space boasts 117,000 acres preserved.

The report valued 12 distinct ecosystem services and found that the natural capital across all three counties was valued at \$4.6-12.6 billion per year- far more than these lands would sell for in the real estate market – but it is still believed to be a conservative estimate given that many services are still difficult to assign value.

“The report highlights the enormous value that natural resources provide as well as the basic idea that we must consider them as capital assets that provide a significant and sustained flow of economic benefits,” said Lisa Lurie, Executive Director for the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County. “Just as we must maintain our roads, bridges and buildings, so must we steward our natural resources to ensure their long-term health and the flow of benefits and services that we gain from them.”

“In Sonoma County, the value of the services provided by public and private natural and working lands ranges from **\$2.2 to \$6.6 billion** – a huge return on decades of local conservation investments by tribes, landowners, public agencies and non-profits,” said Karen Gaffney, Conservation Planning Program Manager for Ag + Open Space. “With the expected impacts of climate change, the continued protection of natural capital is more important than ever. It will not only protect our homes and landscapes, but also save us money in the long run.”

The HLHE Initiative also aims to help local, state, and federal agencies, utilities, and private funders make more informed decisions

**Report at a glance: Annual estimated value of natural capital for selected services**

	<b>Santa Clara Co.</b>	<b>Santa Cruz Co.</b>	<b>Sonoma Co.</b>
<b>Water Supply:</b>	<b>Up to \$156M</b>	<b>Up to \$42M</b>	<b>Up to \$180M</b>
<b>Air Quality:</b>	<b>Up to \$17M</b>	<b>Up to \$14M</b>	<b>Up to \$22M</b>
<b>Wastewater:</b>	<b>Up to \$93M</b>	<b>Up to \$36M</b>	<b>Up to \$117M</b>

about the protection and stewardship of working and natural lands, and how the ecosystem services provided by these lands can complement built infrastructure.

“In Santa Clara County, we have seen a record-breaking drought, increased flooding, more frequent and intense wildfires, and greater pressure on plant and animal species,” said Andrea Mackenzie, General Manager of the Open Space Authority. “It is imperative that we recognize nature as critical infrastructure and invest in protecting and restoring land and water as a climate and community

resilience measure. And where better to pilot this approach than in the Silicon Valley, the hub of innovation and the fastest growing area of the state.”

More figures for all 12 ecosystem services provided by natural and working lands are available in the HLHE Regional Report.

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#### **About the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority**

The Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority conserves the natural environment, supports agriculture, and connects people to nature, by protecting open spaces, natural areas, and working farms and ranches for future generations. Since 1993, the Authority has protected 25,000 acres of open space, preserving the region’s scenic beauty, protecting water resources and other natural capital, and providing outdoor recreation opportunities for Santa Clara Valley residents. Visit [openspaceauthority.org](https://openspaceauthority.org) for more information.

#### **About the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County**

The Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County (District) is a non-regulatory special district that helps people protect, conserve, and restore natural resources through technical assistance, information, and educational programs. The District works with a wide variety of partners, including farming and ranching operations, urban/rural landowners, local agencies and federal, state and local governments. District staff also works closely with the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). For more information, visit [www.rcdsantacruz.org](http://www.rcdsantacruz.org).

#### **About the Sonoma County Ag + Open Space**

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space permanently protects the diverse agricultural, natural resource and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations. These lands are protected through a quarter-cent sales tax approved by voters in 1990 and reauthorized in 2006. To date, we have protected over 117,000 acres of land throughout our region, and will steward these and future protected lands in perpetuity. For more information, please visit [www.sonomaopenspace.org](http://www.sonomaopenspace.org).