



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: Parks, Open Spaces, and Cultural Services

Subject: Approve contract with Lewis Tree Service

Meeting Date: May 6, 2025

Formal Title: Approve agreement with Lewis Tree Service in the amount of \$300,000 for vegetation management efforts at Moran Lake County Park, and take related actions

Recommended Actions

1. Adopt resolution accepting funds in the amount of \$300,000 from the Risk Management Fund for the vegetation management efforts in Moran Lake County Park;
2. Approve agreement with Davey Tree Expert Company DBA Lewis Tree Service in the amount of \$300,000 for miscellaneous tree service; and
3. Authorize the Director of Parks, Open Spaces and Cultural Services or designee to sign the agreement.

Executive Summary

Board approval is requested to accept funds from the Risk Management Fund to pay for vegetation management efforts in the amount of \$300,000 in the monarch butterfly habitat of Moran Lake County Park. Board approval is requested for a contract with Davey Tree Expert Company DBA Lewis Tree Service to perform height reduction and selective removal of eucalyptus trees to reduce risk of failure.

Discussion

Moran Lake County Park and the adjacent Santa Cruz County Sanitation District's D.A Porath facility on Lode Street support an important overwintering site for the western population of the monarch butterfly. Each fall, monarchs migrate from the western United States and Canada to overwinter in sheltered groves of trees along the Pacific Ocean where they are protected from freezing temperatures. In the spring, the monarchs leave the overwintering sites and return to summer breeding and feeding areas. The Moran Lake area typically ranks as the third most populated overwintering site in Santa Cruz County after Natural Bridges State Beach and Lighthouse Field. This trend has held for the last two decades, despite overall dramatic declines in the western population of the monarch butterfly. Moran Lake was listed as one of five critical habitats for monarchs in Santa Cruz County in the recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposal to list the monarch as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Monarch habitat at Moran consists of a core overwintering zone surrounding the northern portion of the Santa Cruz Sanitation District's D.A Porath facility on Lode Street, and a larger shelter zone encompassing the entirety of Moran Lake County Park. The monarchs form roosting clusters in the core overwintering zone to conserve body heat and survive cold temperatures. The monarch habitat in the core and shelter zones at Moran is comprised primarily of non-native Blue Gum Eucalyptus trees with a smaller number of other native and non-native tree and shrub species. The trees in the core

zone serve several critical functions, including the structure and support for monarch clusters, shelter and protection from cold night-time temperatures underneath the canopy of leaves, protection from strong winds, and winter-available nectar sources. The trees in the shelter zone serve primarily to buffer the core zone from strong winds during the overwintering season and also serve as a nectar source for overwintering monarchs.

Management of the monarch butterfly habitat at Moran Lake is split between the Santa Cruz County Sanitation District (District) who manage the Lode Street Facility and the property it, and the Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services Department (County Parks) who manage Moran Lake County Park. Management of the monarch habitat is governed by the current Moran Lake Monarch Butterfly Habitat Management Plan (HMP), which was approved by the Board on December 7, 2010, and covers both Sanitation and County Parks property. The HMP includes guidelines for tree management, including tree pruning and removals, and has a stated goal of preserving trees and minimizing change and disruption to the existing trees to minimize impacts to monarch habitat. Within that overall framework, the HMP provides allowances and recommendations for pruning and removals where necessary for safety and to reduce potential hazards.

County Parks has followed HMP guidelines in managing the trees within Moran Lake, including conducting safety pruning, height reduction, and removals when hazardous conditions are identified by Parks staff, consulting arborists, or the general public. Over the last 10 years, County Parks has spent roughly half of its entire system-wide expenditures on arborist reports and tree work at Moran Lake County Park alone to manage the trees and monarch habitat. Due to budgetary constraints and the restrictions outlined in the current HMP, County Parks has previously been unable to conduct more extensive proactive tree management and instead performs safety pruning, height reductions, and removals on a case-by-case basis to reduce potential hazards. Despite County Parks' efforts within a constrained budget, trees have failed in the past during winter storms, and in some cases have damaged private property and residences. On February 4, 2024, one of the strongest windstorms on record caused the failure of 28 trees on County Parks property.

In 2022, County Parks began the process of updating the HMP to incorporate the latest scientific findings and recommendations and to ensure habitat management procedures were following current best practices for monarch habitat. The consultant team was led by Dr. Stu Weiss, widely recognized as one of the leading experts on monarchs and their habitat, with experience creating management plans for several monarch overwintering sites in California. The project team conducted robust analyses of habitat conditions, interviewed local monarch experts to incorporate their data and observations, and worked closely with regulatory and environmental oversight organizations. This work led to the creation of a public draft of the updated HMP that was shared with the public in Summer 2024. County Parks held a community meeting to share the public draft and collect community input in July 2024. Due in part to the recent failures noted above, surrounding residents expressed a desire for additional tree management work to reduce the risk of future tree failures and claimed that the County was prioritizing monarch habitat over public safety.

As a result of that meeting, County Parks, in collaboration with the First District Supervisor and the Santa Cruz County Sanitation District hired a consultant team to prepare a wind study to analyze impacts of potential tree height reductions and removals on monarch habitat. The goal of the wind study was to determine how the existing vegetation could be managed without negatively impacting monarch habitat. A

draft of the wind study was completed in April (Attachment 1). The wind study showed that the trees south of the main overwintering grove can be removed or reduced in height without negatively impacting monarch habitat. This includes trees in the North and South Lakeside areas along the north and west banks of Moran Lake, and trees southeast of the lake within the 40 Moran Way parcel and the Southeast Grove (see Attachment 2). The final wind study is expected to be completed prior to beginning the tree work proposed under this agenda item and will include review and input from County Parks' consultant arborist, Environmental Planning, and other regulatory agencies.

The tree work scope in the proposed contract with Lewis Tree Service includes height reduction of all the trees in the North and South Lakeside areas (Areas B and C in Attachment 2) to lower their height by roughly one-third, as well as removal of the remaining trees on the 40 Moran Way parcel (Area A1 in Attachment 2). These areas were prioritized for tree management this year because they are closest to the February 2024 failures or were recommended for removal or height reduction by the County's consulting arborist. Trees within the Southeast Grove (Area A2 in Attachment 2) were not prioritized for this initial round of tree management because a substantial number of trees are on private property.

The wind study also demonstrated that the trees in the Critical Windbreak along Placer Street (area H in Attachment 2) can be reduced to a height of 80 feet without negatively impacting monarch habitat. The trees along Placer Street are not included in this year's tree management work due to budget limitations, but they are expected to be included in next year's budget. A large number of the Critical Windbreak trees were safety pruned by the Sanitation District last year and so have already received risk reduction treatments.

The proposed tree work at Moran is part of County Park's ongoing tree management that has occurred in the park for decades. Tree height reduction has proven to be an effective tree management strategy at Moran that minimizes impacts to monarch habitat and reduces risk of tree failure, and eucalyptus typically respond well to height reduction. However, once a eucalyptus tree's height is reduced, it will resprout at the location of the cut. This new growth is less securely attached to the trunk and requires continued monitoring and ongoing maintenance on a roughly 3 to 5-year recurrence interval to remove the new growth and prevent failure of the new growth. Reducing the height of the many trees included in this contract will require that the County commit resources to additional, ongoing maintenance needs to safely manage the trees.

The results of the final wind study and its implications for tree management in the monarch habitat will be shared with the community via a community meeting this summer and will be incorporated into the Updated HMP this fall. County Parks expects to bring the Updated HMP to the Board for approval in late 2025 or early 2026.

The County of Santa Cruz Department of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services has many years of working with Davey Tree Expert Company DBA Lewis Tree Service. Lewis Tree has successfully worked with the Parks Department, specifically for work within the sensitive monarch habitat at Moran Lake County Park. They are especially skilled and knowledgeable in working with other experts around this sensitive habitat and therefore are uniquely qualified to perform the tree trimming work in this contract. The proposed contract with Lewis Tree Service is included in Attachment 3.

Financial Impact

Acceptance of funds from the Risk Management Fund will increase appropriated revenues and expenditures by \$300,000 in the Parks Operating Budget (GL 492300). These funds are sufficient to cover the full cost of the contract with Davey Tree Expert Company under account 492300-61845/RP0034-RJ0 (PARKS OPERATIONS MAINT-MAINT-STRUCT/IMPS/GRDS-OTH-SRV).

Strategic Initiatives

Equity Framework - County Facilities & Infrastructure

Operational Plan - Sustainable Environment, Operational Excellence

Submitted By:

Jeff Gaffney, Director of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services

Recommended By:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Executive Officer

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) did not significantly contribute to the development of this agenda item.