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## **Sonoma County Partners Secure \$8 Million USDA Grant to Build Drought, Climate Change Resiliency**

**SANTA ROSA, CA (February 12, 2016)** – A regional collaboration of resource agencies learned today that it will receive an \$8 million grant to protect agricultural lands and ecosystems for drought and climate resiliency. The initiative is funded by the US Department of Agriculture, through its Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program and supports the five-year “Venture Conservation Program,” which focuses on substantive improvements in Russian River water quality, groundwater levels, wildlife habitat and flows in key creeks and streams.

“I was thrilled to bring together 30 partners to achieve the Venture Conservation Program. The grant is built on a venture capital model that provides seed funding that is matched two-to-one at the local level,” said Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore, who also is a director for the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District and Sonoma County Water Agency. “This collaboration will provide us a generational platform to solve Sonoma County’s core natural resource problems.”

The partnership is led by Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District (Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District) with support from core team partners of Sonoma Resource Conservation District (Sonoma RCD), Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (Gold Ridge RCD), Sonoma County Water Agency (Water Agency) and Pepperwood Dwight Center for Conservation Science (Pepperwood). An advisory team of agricultural, business, agency, environmental and conservation partners will support and expand on the core team’s collaboration.

“Open space land is key in providing resiliency in the future, when droughts and floods are likely to be more frequent and severe. The grant will focus on protecting and enhancing those lands that provide groundwater recharge and that are key to abundant stream flows,” said Gore.

The majority of the funding will be used to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers on agricultural land along stream corridors, in areas that allow water to recharge groundwater basins and in areas that can hold flood water. These areas are foundational to Sonoma County agriculture and will help farmers and the environment to withstand the threat of droughts and climate change.

“This grant recognizes the importance of agriculture to our economy and way of life. It also demonstrates that farming and natural resource protection are not mutually exclusive. Healthy agriculture land can help replenish groundwater aquifers and improve water quality,” said Kara Heckert, Executive Director of the Sonoma RCD.

The targeted conservation easement areas support groundwater recharge, habitat for at-risk plant and animal species, capturing flood waters, and climate adaptation flexibility. These areas contain prime agricultural soils and world-class agriculture that are increasingly encroached upon by residential and commercial development given the proximity to the rapidly urbanizing Bay Area.

“Through this partnership RCDs will work with the grant team and county partners to incorporate current research and other information in working with farmers on best management practices that will help address issues related with drought, climate change, and wildlife while keeping agriculture thriving in Sonoma County,” said Brittany Jensen, Executive Director of the Gold Ridge RCD.

The grant will use the best available science to guide conservation outcomes on the ground, working with models and research developed by the Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District, Water Agency and Pepperwood.

“This grant opportunity provides Sonoma County a unique opportunity to advance the emerging practice of precision conservation. Pepperwood is looking forward to bringing cutting edge research to strategic investments in conservation and working lands. This partnership enables us to build on our local capacity for productive collaboration to create significant on the ground outcomes. We are thrilled to be part of this innovative resilience initiative,” said Lisa Micheli, Director of Pepperwood.

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