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1. Executive Summary

The Measure Q Vision Plan (2025–2030) is Santa Cruz County’s first five-year roadmap for investing in climate resilience, natural resource protection, and equitable public access. Funded by a voter-approved parcel tax generating more than \$7 million annually, Measure Q establishes one of the largest dedicated environmental funding streams in County history.

This Vision Plan sets the initial priorities for how those funds will be invested. It was developed with extensive community and stakeholder engagement and grounded in the review of well over 100 local, regional, and state plans and strategies, with guidance from the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board (COAB). The Vision Plan provides a unified framework for all Measure Q allocations—including the County-administered grant program, the four cities, the unincorporated county, and the Resource Conservation District and Land Trust of Santa Cruz County—ensuring that investments are strategic, transparent, and accountable.

WHAT THE VISION PLAN GOVERNS

Measure Q funding is distributed across four allocations, all guided by this Vision Plan:

- **County-Administered Grant Program (40 percent)** – Competitive grants for projects that address water, wildfire, biodiversity, coastal resilience, and equitable access. Within this program, \$500,000 annually is set aside for projects serving the Pajaro Valley watershed and \$250,000 annually for projects in the San Vicente Redwoods property, the largest conservation easement in Santa Cruz County.
- **Incorporated Cities (20 percent)** – Direct allocations to Santa Cruz, Watsonville, Capitola, and Scotts Valley (minimum \$200,000 annually per city), to advance projects within city limits.
- **Unincorporated County (20 percent)** – Funds for projects in rural and suburban communities managed directly by the County.
- **Resource Conservation District and Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (20 percent)** – Dedicated to advancing land stewardship, wildfire resilience, habitat protection, and water quality improvements.

While each allocation is managed independently, the Vision Plan establishes one shared framework for priorities, principles, and reporting so that investments are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

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FIVE-YEAR PRIORITIES (2025–2030)

In its first five years, Measure Q will emphasize early action and visible results through three thematic priorities:

1. **Water Resources Management** – Protect drinking water, restore floodplains and wetlands, improve stormwater systems, and enhance groundwater recharge, with Pinto Lake highlighted as a critical water quality priority.
2. **Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health** – Reduce hazardous fuels, create defensible space, protect evacuation routes, and improve forest health at landscape scale.
3. **Parks, Recreation, Access, and Equity** – Expand safe and equitable access to parks, trails, and coastal areas, with a focus on South County and historically underserved communities.

PRINCIPLES FOR EVALUATING PROJECTS

All Measure Q projects will be evaluated using shared principles that ensure consistency across allocations. These are not yet grant criteria but will guide all funding decisions.

Top Four Principles (highest weight in decision-making)

- **Multi-Benefit Outcomes** – Projects that deliver multiple ecological, social, and economic benefits at once (for example, a wetland restoration that improves water quality, reduces flooding, creates wildlife habitat, and adds recreational access).
- **Match Funding and Leveraging Potential** – Projects that can attract State, federal, or private funding to stretch local dollars and expand impact.
- **Equity Impact** – Directing resources toward historically underserved communities, especially in South County, to reduce disparities in access, health, and climate risk.
- **Climate Resilience Value** – Projects that reduce risks from wildfire, flooding, drought, extreme heat, and sea level rise.

Additional Co-Equal Principles (important considerations applied equally)

- **Public Benefit** – Projects must provide clear, visible value for the community, whether through improved safety, healthier ecosystems, or better recreation.
- **Strategic Alignment** – Projects should reinforce existing local, regional, and State plans, avoiding duplication and strengthening partnerships.

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- **Readiness** – Shovel-ready projects will be prioritized for early action, while planning or pilot projects that cannot readily be funded by State or federal grants will be supported to build a long-term project pipeline.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Success will be measured not only by the quality of projects but also by transparency, inclusivity, and long-term impact. Key commitments include:

- Funding shovel-ready projects alongside planning that builds a pipeline for the future.
- Developing interactive mapping tools to show needs, opportunities, and results.
- Tracking environmental outcomes, equity impacts, and resilience metrics.
- Annual review and oversight by the COAB to ensure accountability.

By focusing early action on water, wildfire, and equitable access—while grounding all investments in shared principles—Measure Q will deliver visible improvements, leverage additional funding, and build long-term resilience for the people and landscapes of Santa Cruz County.

The remainder of this Vision Plan lays out the pathway for implementation, starting with background on Santa Cruz County and the origins of Measure Q. The six thematic focus areas that reflect the county's most pressing needs are introduced followed by the shared principles and five-year priorities and how they will guide project selection. The Vision Plan concludes with strategies for implementation, accountability, and leveraging outside funding. Appendices provide detailed summaries of community and stakeholder engagement, along with a literature review of the more than 100 plans and strategies that informed this Vision Plan.

2. Introduction and Planning Context

The Measure Q Vision Plan

The Measure Q Vision Plan is the document that outlines the roadmap for implementing and distributing Measure Q grant funds and should drive all investment strategies. Required by the measure to be reviewed every five years, this inaugural plan has set the initial priorities through broad community and stakeholder engagement, ensuring investments reflect both countywide and local needs.

The Vision Plan will inform the County-administered grant program by establishing thematic priorities, geographies and project types to support review, and award of projects. It identifies the project types and geographies most critical for protecting water quality, reducing wildfire risks, restoring habitats, safeguarding coastal areas, and expanding equitable public access.

As a recurring strategic roadmap, the Vision Plan ensures Measure Q adapts to changing conditions, leverages additional resources, and delivers lasting benefits. It is both a tool of accountability and a statement of community values, guiding Measure Q's role in protecting natural resources and enhancing quality of life for generations to come.

Measure Q Overview

Voter-Supported Funding

Approved by Santa Cruz County voters in November 2024, the Safe Drinking Water, Clean Beaches, Wildfire Risk Reduction, and Wildlife Protection Initiative—commonly referred to as Measure Q—creates a long-term local funding mechanism to strengthen climate resilience, protect natural resources, and expand equitable public access.

Through a modest parcel tax of \$87 annually, Measure Q generates more than \$7 million each year, establishing one of the largest dedicated environmental funding streams in county history. These funds provide a stable, community-driven source of investment in watershed health, wildfire prevention, habitat restoration, coastal protection, and recreation—reflecting the county's collective commitment to protecting its environment and safeguarding residents' well-being for generations to come.

Funding Distribution

Measure Q funds are allocated as follows to ensure both countywide impact and local benefit:

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- 40 percent to a County-administered grant program for projects that address a broad array of environmental challenges with explicit funds set aside for projects serving the Pajaro Valley watershed and the San Vicente Redwoods property, the largest conservation easement in Santa Cruz County.
- 20 percent to the four incorporated cities (Santa Cruz, Watsonville, Capitola, Scotts Valley), distributed by population with a minimum of \$200,000 guaranteed annually for each.
- 20 percent to the unincorporated county to support projects in rural and urban communities and natural landscapes.
- 20 percent to the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County (RCD) and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (LTSCC), the chosen land stewardship implementation partner to work on advancing projects that generate public benefits such as wildfire resilience, water quality improvements, and habitat protection.

This framework balances equity and effectiveness, ensuring investments strengthen stewardship across jurisdictions, landscapes, and communities.

<INSERT FUNDING SPLIT DIAGRAM>

Role of the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board

The passage of Measure Q established a nine-member Citizens Oversight Advisory Board (COAB) to ensure transparency, alignment with community priorities, and accountability in implementation. The COAB is composed of subject-matter experts: five appointed by the County Board of Supervisors and one by each incorporated city. Meeting at least quarterly, the COAB provides a public forum for review and input.

The COAB's responsibilities include:

- Reviewing annual reports from funded agencies and organizations.
- Holding public hearings to gather input on funding priorities.
- Supporting the development of and approving the Vision Plan every five years.
- Helping to ensure that investments reflect Measure Q's principles of multi-benefit, match funding, equity, and climate resilience.

Through its role, the COAB ensures that Measure Q investments follow the programmed areas approved by the voters, are informed by expert input, and are held to high standards of transparency.

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Vision Plan Development

The inaugural Measure Q Vision Plan (2025–2030) was developed between March and October 2025 by the project team, made up of Santa Cruz County Parks Department and the Office of Response, Recovery, and Resilience, with support from PlaceWorks and Matt Freeman Consulting. The process centered on broad and inclusive engagement from stakeholder organizations and community to ensure that key practitioner and community priorities guided the plan’s development.

A public online survey, four in-person community workshops, one virtual community workshop, 13 stakeholder meetings, an online stakeholder survey, and additional outreach engaged the public and representatives from cities, community-based organizations, environmental groups, and State and regulatory agencies ([see Appendix A, Community Engagement Synthesis](#), and [Appendix B, Stakeholder Engagement Synthesis](#)). Throughout the process, the COAB provided guidance, reviewed drafts, and hosted public meetings to ensure the Vision Plan reflected the intent of Measure Q.

In addition to engagement, the project team reviewed more than 20 approved local and regional planning documents to align the Vision Plan with established goals and priorities ([see Appendix C, Literature Review](#)).

The result is a five-year roadmap that is grounded in community input and regional planning frameworks and will guide funding decisions and ensure Measure Q delivers broad and lasting benefits.

<INSERT PROCESS DIAGRAM>

<SIDEBAR: PLANS INCLUDED IN THE LITERATURE REVIEW>

Santa Cruz County Context

Santa Cruz County, situated along California’s Central Coast where the Santa Cruz Mountains meet Monterey Bay, is recognized for its exceptional natural, topographic, and geologic diversity. Spanning coastal bluffs, sandy beaches, estuaries, fertile river valleys, wetlands and slough systems, steep mountains, and iconic redwood forests. Located within a biodiversity hotspot, the county supports unique habitats such as coastal prairie, maritime chaparral, sandhills, old-growth redwoods, and coastal lagoons and lowlands floodplains and riparian corridors of the valley floor. These landscapes sustain many rare, threatened, and endangered species, from coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), Santa Cruz long-toed salamander (*Ambystoma macrodactylum croceum*), and the California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) to the endemic plants of the Santa Cruz sandhills grasslands and coastal terrace.

These diverse natural landscapes are also home to over 270,000 human residents and the county hosts millions more who come to visit the natural beauty every year. Santa Cruz

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County sits at the leading edge of climate-driven natural disasters, with eight federally declared disasters since 2017 from floods to catastrophic wildfire, a tornado, atmospheric river winter storms and coastal wave and storm events. This community, its residents, and an array of flora and fauna in the natural landscapes are also home to a world-class network of parks and open spaces, including Big Basin Redwoods, Castle Rock, Henry Cowell, and The Forest of Nisene Marks State Parks; Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument; San Vicente Redwoods, Coast Dairies, Natural Bridges, Lighthouse Field, New Brighton, Sunset, and Manresa State Beaches; and beloved City and County parks that connect people and visitors to nature and support healthy lifestyles and Santa Cruz's tourism economy. Working lands also form a cornerstone of the county's economy and cultural identity. Fertile farmland anchors the agricultural sector, while sustainably managed timberlands provide redwood and Douglas fir to regional markets. The region's history is deeply connected to agriculture, tourism, timber production, and environmental protection. These ongoing and lasting legacies have had profound impacts on the nature of our redwood forests, development patterns, and land ownership patterns. The County's stewardship and open space protection also has a long history dating back to the creation of the oldest State Park, Big Basin State Park, by Sempervirens Fund in 1902. There is a growing recognition that resilience focused and ecologically centered stewardship of our public and private lands, tied to Indigenous communities, represented today by the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, is critical. Their traditional ecological knowledge continues to inform restoration, cultural resource protection, and land management.

Protecting all residents living in the County of Santa Cruz (including within the four cities), developing resilience within our communities, and restoring the County's coast, open spaces, and working lands is essential to adapting to, and more equitably recovering from, the impacts of a changing climate. Investments in these landscapes sustain biodiversity, safeguard local drinking water, and buffer communities from sea level rise, wildfire, and flooding. Climate-resilient stewardship also preserves scenic landscapes, recreational opportunities, and agricultural productivity, ensuring that the ecological, cultural, and economic values of Santa Cruz County endure for future generations.

<INSERT PHOTO COLLAGE OF SANTA CRUZ LANDSCAPES>

3. Project Type Prioritization

Measure Q establishes four primary funding sources or allocations. These are: (1) the County-administered grant program (40 percent), (2) the four incorporated cities (20 percent total), (3) the unincorporated area of Santa Cruz County (20 percent), and (4) the Resource Conservation District (RCD) and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County as the identified land stewardship implementation partner (20 percent total). While the Measure Q language for each funding allocation reflects specific language around eligible projects and priorities, each funding allocation reflects a common priority around addressing extreme weather, natural disasters, climate change impacts, water pollution or saltwater intrusion impacts. Understanding that each participating jurisdiction and partner has distinct responsibilities and opportunities under their authority, the goal of the Vision Plan is to develop a prioritization criteria that can be shared across all allocations and will specifically support the County-administered grant program. Alignment of eligible project selection criteria ensures that every investment delivers high value and aligns with the overarching goals of the Measure Q Vision Plan and the measure language. By aligning in this way, the goal of the Vision Plan and implementation is to build public trust in the stewardship of this property tax revenue. While the County, Cities, RCD, and LTSCC will manage their own shares of funding, there is a common reporting and accounting requirement led by the County and COAB. Theme or project alignment, to the greatest extent possible, across all four allocations will help ensure investments are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Vision Plan Thematic Priorities

The Vision Plan development process, including stakeholder and community engagement, revealed a coalescing around three top thematic priorities for the Measure Q funding. These priorities reflect the community's focus on safety, resilience, and access, while also addressing the need for geographic equity and investment in historically underserved areas.

The following three thematic areas offer extensive opportunities for multi-benefit projects that intersect with other thematic areas. The prioritization of projects in these thematic areas does not preclude worthy projects that meet many of the core prioritization principals in other thematic areas from grant awards or project selection. These thematic priorities are not listed in any particular priority order.

Water Resource Management emerged as a clear priority with an emphasis on public safety and climate and habitat resilience. Residents and stakeholders emphasize the importance of flood protection, clean drinking water, and healthy watersheds. Projects that restore floodplains and wetlands, improve stormwater systems, and enhance groundwater

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recharge can simultaneously protect public safety, secure water supply, and support ecosystem health.

Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health also ranked as a top concern. Strategic landscape-scale forest health and fuel reduction, hazardous fuel reduction along evacuation routes, and neighborhood-scale hazard mitigation are essential for protecting lives, property, and critical natural resources. These investments are particularly important in communities most vulnerable to fire, and when paired with collaborative planning, can position local projects to compete successfully for State and federal funding.

Parks, Recreation, Access, and Equity with an emphasis on parks improvements, trails, and access projects that expand safe, equitable access to open space was also an identified top priority. In particular, increasing access to parks and other outdoor areas, including the coast, in South County and underserved neighborhoods is emphasized.

Early implementation should strike a balance between immediate action and long-term capacity building. Measure Q can deliver early wins by funding a mix of shovel-ready projects alongside planning and pre-development efforts that will build a robust pipeline of future projects. Priorities for early action include visible investments in South County communities to demonstrate responsiveness and equity in action, and investments in projects within high hazard communities.

Core Project Prioritization Principles

The core project prioritization principles for the Measure Q Vision Plan and implementation are designed to ensure that every investment delivers lasting and equitable value for Santa Cruz County wholistically. At the forefront are four guiding priorities: achieving **multi-benefit outcomes** that maximize climate resiliency and adaption; leveraging **match funding and partnerships** to stretch local dollars or make more competitive grant applications and supports durable collaborations; and ensuring a strong **equity impact** by directing resources toward historically underserved or vulnerable communities these first three priority principals are specifically called out in the Measure Q language. Advancing **climate resilience** through projects that reduce wildfire, flood, drought, and sea level rise risks is also named as a common priority across all funding allocation areas. Together, these priorities reflect the community's call for efficient, fair, and future-focused investments—creating projects that not only deliver immediate benefits but also build long-term resilience.

These four core priority principals are of equal importance and will be used to guide all Measure Q investment.

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1. Multi-Benefit Outcomes

Projects that achieve multiple ecological, social, and economic outcomes are strongly encouraged. For example, a stream restoration project that improves water quality, reduces flood risk, expands habitat connectivity, and creates new recreational access exemplifies a multi-benefit investment. This approach reflects both stakeholder and public input, which emphasized the importance of using limited funds efficiently to address overlapping needs rather than narrowly defined outcomes.

2. Match Funding and Leveraging Potential

Measure Q funds are intended to catalyze broader investment rather than operate in isolation. Projects that demonstrate the ability to attract matching funds will be prioritized. Leveraging external resources increases the overall impact of Measure Q, extends the reach of local dollars, and builds durable partnerships that sustain projects beyond the initial investment period. At the same time, this principle does not preclude smaller-scale investments in local or community-based projects that may not have match funding but provide high value to disadvantaged communities.

3. Equity Impact

A central intent of Measure Q is to expand benefits to underserved and historically marginalized communities, particularly in South Santa Cruz County. Projects will be evaluated on their ability to reduce disparities in access to open space and recreation, improve environmental health conditions in disadvantaged neighborhoods, reduce climate risks or build resilience in vulnerable populations, and engage local residents in project design and stewardship. Equity considerations also include reducing barriers to participation for smaller organizations or community-based groups that may not traditionally access public funding.

4. Climate Resilience Value

Projects will be prioritized based on their capacity to reduce climate risks such as wildfire, flooding, drought, sea level rise, and extreme heat. Stakeholder and public engagement strongly underscored the importance of fuel reduction in fire-prone areas, floodplain and wetland restoration, and coastal habitat protection. These investments are viewed as essential to protecting communities, ecosystems, and infrastructure in a changing climate.

Through community and stakeholder outreach and engagement conversations, three additional key priorities were identified that each speak to building public trust in the implementation of Measure Q. They are a clear **public benefit** to ensure projects do not solely benefit environmental or ecological needs but provide clear impacts that can be seen by community. **Readiness** or “shovel-ready” projects were listed as an early implementation priority to ensure clear visible outcomes are seen rather than early investments going towards projects years out or planning processes. The last was **strategic alignment** this was identified in recognition of the

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extensive list of thematic plans and studies, many of which had their own robust community engagement process. Strategic alignment better ensures broad community support for the selected project.

Public Benefit

Measure Q emphasizes that all funded projects must produce clear public benefits. These may include enhancing resilience to climate change for communities, expanding equitable access to nature, providing safe and inclusive recreation opportunities, enhancing environmental education, or engaging volunteers and youth in stewardship. Public benefit ensures that the community sees and experiences the value of Measure Q investments, whether through improved health and safety, expanded access, or enriched cultural and educational opportunities.

Readiness

Projects that are shovel-ready, or that have advanced through key pre-development steps such as environmental review, permitting, design, or site control, will be prioritized. Ready-to-implement projects allow Measure Q funds to have an immediate and visible impact, demonstrate early success, and build momentum for longer-term investments. Readiness does not preclude support for planning or pilot efforts, but it ensures that a portion of funds are consistently directed to projects capable of delivering immediate benefits.

Strategic Alignment

Projects will also be assessed on their alignment with adopted regional, local, and State plans ([see Appendix C: Literature Review](#)). Strategic alignment encourages consistency across agencies, avoids duplication of effort, and ensures that Measure Q investments leverage and reinforce broader planning initiatives. Projects that demonstrate collaboration among jurisdictions, nonprofits, land trusts, and tribal partners will be especially valued.

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4. Thematic Focus Areas

Introduction

Measure Q encompasses a wide range of potential project types and geographies, which reflects the complexity of Santa Cruz County's landscapes, communities, and climate challenges. To provide structure and a common framework for discussion, the Vision Plan organizes generalized project types and geographies into six thematic areas. These themes were developed by the project team through analysis of existing studies and plans and recognizing thematic patterns in logical groupings (see Appendix C for information on what plans were reviewed to inform the vision plan themes, priorities, project types, and geographies). These thematic areas allow for more nuanced content, project needs, and geographic considerations, and they formed the basis for dialogue during community engagement and stakeholder meetings with subject-matter experts ([see Appendix A, Community Engagement Synthesis](#), and [Appendix B, Stakeholder Engagement Synthesis](#)).

The six themes are:

- <ICON> Water Resources Management
- <ICON> Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health
- <ICON> Wildlife and Habitat Protection
- <ICON> Parks, Recreation, Public Access and Equity
- <ICON> Agricultural and Working Lands Protection
- <ICON> Coastal Protection and Adaptation

Climate Resilience as a Crosscutting Principle

While each theme highlights distinct issues and opportunities, all are united by a central principle: advancing climate resilience. Measure Q was designed to safeguard Santa Cruz County residents, infrastructure, and flora and fauna against climate-driven risks, including wildfire, flooding, sea level rise, and drought, while protecting the ecosystems that sustain life here. Every theme touches on this goal, whether through watershed protection, forest stewardship, habitat restoration, or equitable access to green spaces.

From Themes to Multi-Benefit Projects

Organizing project types and priority geographies by theme provides a way to capture the breadth of Measure Q's scope. Yet, in practice, the most impactful investments will often cut across multiple themes. A single project, such as restoring a floodplain, can simultaneously improve water quality, expand habitat, reduce flood risk, and create new recreational

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opportunities. Or a shaded fuel break project can serve as a trail for park access, improve forest health and habitat, and provide a buffer for adjacent homes or infrastructure. For this reason, Measure Q explicitly emphasizes **multi-benefit projects** that deliver ecological, social, and economic value across categories. This chapter therefore introduces each theme and its associated project types while acknowledging that overlap is both inevitable and desirable. Multi-benefit approaches are discussed further in the Prioritization chapter.

Purpose of This Chapter

The remainder of this chapter provides a thematic catalog of potential Measure Q project types and geographies. For each theme, it presents background and context, key challenges and opportunities, illustrative project types, and a five-year Vision Plan implementation pathway. The thematic areas are organized by the order in which they appear in the original voter-approved measure.

Water Resources Management

Background and Context

Santa Cruz County relies almost entirely on local rainfall to replenish its streams, creeks, and groundwater aquifers, with no access to imported water. These limited, locally derived water supplies are essential for drinking water, agriculture, and ecosystem function, making their protection a critical priority. However, the county's water resources are vulnerable to overdraft, pollution, erosion, saltwater intrusion, nitrate contamination, and harmful algal blooms—pressures that are further intensified by climate-driven extremes such as rising temperatures, drought, flooding, and wildfire. Measure Q is designed to safeguard key drinking water sources, including the San Lorenzo River, North Coast streams, and major groundwater basins in Pajaro Valley, Mid-County, and the San Lorenzo Valley. Measure Q prioritizes improving water quality by addressing soil erosion and non-point source pollution, while also strengthening the long-term reliability of water supplies in the face of growing climate and demand-related pressures. Additionally, Measure Q recognizes the importance of protecting coastal waters and marine life from pollution, underscoring the county's commitment to both environmental health and community well-being.

Relevant planning documents that have informed this thematic section include:

- Santa Cruz and Pajaro Integrated Regional Water Management Plans
- Integrated Watershed Restoration Program
- 2021 Santa Cruz County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan
- Local Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Regional Conservation Investment Strategy
- Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan

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- Conservation Blueprint of Santa Cruz County
- California Water Plan Update 2023
- California Adaptation Planning Guide
- Forthcoming Pajaro River Watershed Resilience Program (Department of Water Resources–funded project, prioritized project list expected October 23, 2025)
- Pajaro Valley Basin Management Plan (2014)
- Santa Cruz Mid-County Groundwater Sustainability Plan (2019)
- Santa Margarita Groundwater Sustainability Plan (2021)
- Total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) for various creeks and water bodies across Santa Cruz County

Approaches to Measure Q Investment Regarding Water Resources

Guided by the aforementioned plans, and through stakeholder outreach and conversations with local water resource professionals, the Vision Plan has identified a number of project types to support local water resources. While there is recognition that water management infrastructure is aging and requires substantial upgrades, the high cost of some gray infrastructure projects may limit the ability of Measure Q funding to meet this need. Measure Q funding will likely provide a much higher return on investment by aligning with strategies that emphasize nature-based solutions, green infrastructure, and climate adaptation. Across the county's groundwater basins, ongoing challenges such as overdraft, contaminants including nitrate, and seawater intrusion highlight the importance of continued investment in conservation, managed aquifer recharge, and water quality improvements. Local professionals have been extremely successful in protecting natural and working lands to help safeguard water resources by preserving and managing forests, wetlands, and open spaces that naturally filter and store water, reduce runoff, and recharge aquifers. These landscapes also reduce erosion and pollution from reaching streams and groundwater, supporting both clean drinking water and healthy ecosystems. These landscapes also prevent erosion and pollution from reaching streams and groundwater, supporting both clean drinking water and healthy ecosystems.

Measure Q funding can support water resource sustainability through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but reflects project types that were highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Water Supply and Groundwater Recharge.** Projects that protect surface water streams in water supply watersheds, enhance natural or managed recharge of aquifers, safeguard groundwater from depletion or contamination, and ensure reliable access to drinking water particularly for vulnerable communities. Examples: land conservation in water supply watersheds, managed aquifer recharge projects, and other green infrastructure approaches to help address groundwater overdraft, seawater intrusion, and drinking water quality.

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- **Water Quality Protection and Pollution Prevention.** Projects that address erosion and non-point source pollution; improve the quality of surface waters, lakes, and groundwater; or address land use impacts on water quality. Examples are bioswales, sediment basins, vegetated buffers, and waterway, wetland/floodplain restoration, as well as projects that reduce nutrient levels in groundwater and surface water and limit harmful algal blooms in lakes and sloughs.
- **Flood Protection and Stormwater Management.** Projects that reduce flood risk through floodplain and habitat restoration, nature-based approaches, or green infrastructure; upgrades to aging grey infrastructure where improvements can unlock substantial environmental benefits. Examples: floodplain restoration, removing impervious surfaces, upstream stormwater detention basins, and integrated flood-management projects in river corridors and slough systems.
- **Watershed Health and Resilience.** Projects that improve ecological function and habitat integrity within watersheds, enhance aquatic and riparian habitat, reduce risks of erosion or ecosystem impacts from catastrophic wildfire, droughts, or flooding, or address land-use impacts on watershed resources. Examples: wetland and riparian restoration, agriculture and upland erosion control, and integrated watershed management plans, in-channel stream wood installation, forest health and fire risk reduction projects.

<MAP: Priority Geographies >

Water resources are consistently the highest priority because the county depends entirely on local rainfall, streams, and groundwater for drinking water, agriculture, and ecosystem function. Plans and stakeholders emphasized the importance of protecting recharge areas, improving water quality, and restoring natural hydrology to reduce flood risks and sustain salmon recovery.

Priority Geographies

- San Lorenzo River and North Coast Stream Water Supply Watersheds (water supply, groundwater recharge, and watershed resilience)
- Primary Groundwater Recharge Areas Countywide (water supply and groundwater recharge including Santa Margarita, Mid-County, and Pajaro Valley)
- Lower Pajaro River Floodplain and Watsonville Sloughs (flood management, wetland restoration)
- San Lorenzo River Watershed (water quality, salmon recovery)
- Pinto and College Lakes (water quality, habitat restoration)

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- North Coast Streams and Estuaries: Laguna, San Vicente, and Scott Creeks (watershed resilience, salmon recovery)
- Mid-county Lagoons: Corcoran, Moran, Schwan (water quality, flood management)

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially those in groundwater-reliant areas), and improve climate resilience. Potential grant sources include Prop 4, Prop 1, Clean Water Act Section 319(h) funds, and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) funding. Aligning projects with Integrated Regional Water Management Plans, the Regional Conservation Investment Strategy, Groundwater Sustainability Plans, and the other regional conservation plans and strategies that have been widely peer reviewed and vetted by funders will maximize the likelihood that Measure Q funding will serve as local match. In addition, the Pajaro River Watershed Resilience Program, funded by the Department of Water Resources, will deliver a prioritized list of projects in October 2025, offering another opportunity to align Measure Q investments with State-supported resilience and habitat objectives. Additional priorities identified by stakeholders include integrated watershed management, nature-based flood protection, protecting drinking water quality, and early-stage investment in projects to unlock larger funding sources.

Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health

Background and Context

Healthy forests in Santa Cruz County play a vital role in supporting wildlife habitat, with remaining old-growth redwoods providing especially critical refuge for rare species like the marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*). Redwood forests also capture coastal fog and gradually release water, helping sustain stream flows that contribute to local drinking water supplies. Additionally, many county and city residents live inside the wildland-urban interface (WUI) or are adjacent to medium, high, and very high fire severity zones. Our forests are also iconic destinations that draw visitors and contribute significantly to the region's quality of life. Sustainably managed timber production forests also support the local timber economy by providing jobs and producing lumber under some of the world's most rigorous environmental standards. However, many of our forested lands, both public and private, are second- and third-generation stands that have not seen natural fire cycles or proper forest management for decades. This has caused fuels and biomass to accumulate, increasing the risk and severity of wildfires as demonstrated by the destructive CZU Lightning Complex fires in 2020.

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One goal of Measure Q projects is to reduce wildfire risk and maintain forest health in the face of a changing climate by supporting projects that improve forest health, create defensible space around communities, critical infrastructure and evacuation routes, and enhance overall resilience. Key strategies include establishing shaded fuel breaks, implementing forest management practices to reduce hazardous fuel loads, and providing stewardship assistance to private landowners to boost fire resilience across the landscape.

This thematic section was guided by key stakeholder engagement and local, regional, and State plans that address fire risk reduction and forest health, including:

- 2021 Santa Cruz County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (scheduled to be updated in 2026)
- 2025 Santa Cruz County Local Hazard Mitigation Plan (in development)
- Regional Priority Plan for Forest Health
- California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan
- Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy
- Pathways to 30x30 California

Approaches to Measure Q Investment Regarding Wildfire Risk Reduction and Forest Health

Land managers and fire professionals recommend a coordinated, landscape-scale approach for Measure Q funding to reduce wildfire risk while promoting ecosystem health and community safety. Strategic investments should prioritize fuel management projects that establish defensible space around vulnerable communities in the WUI, protect critical infrastructure such as water supply systems and electric utilities, and ensure that emergency evacuation routes and firefighting access roads remain functional. Integrated fuels reduction and forest health projects, such as combining invasive species removal with shaded fuel breaks, can offer multiple benefits. These efforts should include robust planning, permitting, and coordination across property lines and jurisdictions, and be co-designed with Indigenous partners wherever possible to incorporate traditional stewardship methods alongside long-term planning, maintenance, and monitoring.

Expanding the use of prescribed fire and cultural burning is essential to building resilient landscapes that are easier and less costly to maintain over time, while also fostering greater public understanding and acceptance of these practices. Community engagement is key: programs like chipping and green waste removal can be entry points for deeper involvement by FireWise communities and resilience and risk--reduction projects. Long-term maintenance must be built into treatment strategies, with shaded fuel breaks often requiring retreatment every three to seven years. Finally, these projects should serve as a platform for workforce development to strengthen local capacity in forest management, with skilled labor needed in areas as diverse as heavy equipment operation to field-based

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monitoring. Each project provides essential opportunities for public education to highlight the importance and success of fire risk-reduction efforts through storytelling and performance metrics.

Measure Q funding can reduce wildfire risk, increase community resilience, and promote forest health through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but reflects project types highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Prescribed Fire and Fuels Management.** Projects that include prescribed or cultural burning, shaded fuel breaks, or other vegetation management to reduce fuel loads and fire severity, and related monitoring and stewardship activities. Examples: prescribed and cultural burns, shaded fuel breaks, mechanical thinning, and hand crew vegetation removal, biomass processing, biochar production, and maintenance of existing projects.
- **Community Protection and Emergency Preparedness.** Projects that establish defensible space around WUI communities and schools, protect public utilities and infrastructure, and maintain emergency evacuation routes and regional truck trails. Examples: brush and ladder fuel clearing, community chipping programs, and green waste removal, planning and implementation of FireWise and other neighborhood-scale fire preparedness plans.
- **Landscape-Scale Forest Health and Resilience.** Efforts aimed at planning and restoring forest ecosystems and improving resilience across large areas, often through cross-jurisdictional partnerships. Examples: landscape-level forest treatment strategies, biomass removal, and utilization.
- **Post-Fire Recovery and Risk Mitigation.** Efforts to stabilize land after wildfires, restore habitats, and reduce the risk of future damage. Examples: reforestation, erosion control, invasive species management, biomass utilization.
- **Wildfire Risk Planning, Assessment, and Monitoring.** Planning and monitoring initiatives that inform decision-making, identify treatment priorities, and track the effectiveness of fire mitigation efforts. Examples: LiDAR-based fuel mapping, fire modeling, Regional Prioritization Planning, and adaptive management plans.

<MAP: Priority Geographies>

The 2020 CZU Fire highlighted the county's vulnerability to catastrophic wildfire and underscored the importance of investing in WUI areas and high-risk corridors. Stakeholders prioritized projects that reduce fuels, protect communities and infrastructure, and expand prescribed fire and ecological forest management practices across the Santa Cruz Mountains.

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Priority Geographies

- Empire Grade, Bonny Doon, and Highway 9 corridors (community protection)
- Corralitos, Day Valley, and Summit Road areas (community protection)
- Las Cumbres, Zayante/Lompico, and other WUI communities (community protection)
- Pajaro Valley, particularly underserved communities (community protection)
- Other WUI zones countywide (community protection)
- Emergency access routes and public utilities (community protection)
- Wilder Ranch to Henry Cowell corridor (prescribed fire and fuels management)
- Upper Nisene Marks watershed (prescribed fire and fuels management)
- North Coast and San Vicente Redwoods (fuels management and forest health)
- Santa Cruz Mountains upper watersheds (forest health and resilience)

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially those in high wildfire risk zones due to fire severity and/or lack of adequate evacuation routes), and improve climate resilience. Due to the high cost of larger-scale wildfire risk reduction projects, Measure Q can provide critical match or project development funding for projects included in the aforementioned plans and as stated above. By supporting large public and private landowners, FireSafe Councils, Firewise Communities, Prescribed Burn Associations, or other forest health and fuels management planning efforts, it can help advance crucial projects into shovel-ready status. In doing so, Measure Q can leverage or extend funding from CalFire, Forest Health, Prop 4, or other grants. By using Measure Q to advance cutting green tape and permit streamlining efforts, impactful projects can be delivered much faster and at far less cost. Other opportunities include community and neighborhood-scale efforts where local match by the community may serve to expand the reach of Measure Q funds through chipping programs, defensible space work, and evacuate route fuels reduction. Additional priorities identified by stakeholders include support for prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space projects, and education and outreach to low-income and high-risk communities.

Wildlife and Habitat Protection

Background and Context

Santa Cruz County supports remarkable biodiversity, including rare and endemic species such as the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, Mount Hermon June beetle (*Polyphylla barbata*), California red-legged frog, coho salmon, and tricolored blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*), as well as rare habitats like old-growth redwood forests, coastal wetlands, Santa Cruz sandhills, and maritime chaparral, slough systems, and lowland floodplains. These

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ecosystems provide flood protection, water storage and filtration, nutrient cycling, and habitat for threatened species, while also supporting the county's natural beauty, outdoor recreation, and cultural identity. Despite a tremendous legacy of open space protection in the redwood forests and mountain landscapes, important environments such as sloughs, wetlands, and agricultural valleys have seen limited conservation, and across the county wildlife and the natural environment continue to face ongoing threats from habitat fragmentation, invasive species, disrupted fire regimes and legacy development patterns. Climate change is further altering habitats and shifting species ranges, highlighting the need for adaptive strategies and connected landscapes. Many of the county's most biodiverse and culturally important habitats remain without long-term protection or adequate stewardship funding, putting their ecological integrity at risk.

Measure Q emphasizes the protection and enhancement of Santa Cruz County's rich biodiversity, recognizing the presence of numerous sensitive species and habitats. It supports projects that protect and restore important habitats and establish wildlife corridors to improve habitat connectivity. Measure Q also emphasizes the role of farms, rangelands, wetlands, slough systems, and sustainably managed forests in supporting biodiversity while providing co-benefits like improved water quality, reduced wildfire risk, carbon sequestration, and expanded access to natural lands. Specific project examples include restoring habitats for anadromous fish, protecting wildlife corridors, not only across highways, but also across agricultural valleys and riparian floodplains, and developing wildlife-friendly infrastructure such as bridges and culverts.

This thematic section was guided by key stakeholder engagement and local, regional, and State plans that address wildlife and habitat protection:

- Santa Cruz County Regional Conservation Investment Strategy (RCIS).
- Habitat Conservation Plans and Natural Community Conservation Plans
- Sandhills Conservation and Management Plan
- Watsonville Urban Greening Plan
- Species Recovery Plans
- Conservation Blueprint for Santa Cruz County
- Pathways to 30x30 California
- California Wildlife Action Plan
- Local watershed and parks plans that integrate habitat protection goals

Approaches to Measure Q Investment for Wildlife and Habitat Protection

Santa Cruz County has benefited from decades of collaborative biodiversity planning and conservation success. Biodiversity experts point to local reports like the Conservation Blueprint for Santa Cruz County, Habitat Conservation Plans, and the Regional Conservation Investment Strategy to guide Measure Q implementation. These planning frameworks highlight not only the redwood forests and mountain habitats of North County but also

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major South County efforts, including the Pajaro River Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, restoration projects in the Watsonville Slough system and Pinto Lake, farmland protection in the Pajaro Valley, and estuarine acquisitions such as Beach Ranch. Combined, these initiatives underscore the countywide commitment to conserving biodiversity across forests, rangelands, wetlands, sloughs, and agricultural valleys. Priority issues for Measure Q investment include protection of unique habitats and rare, threatened, and endemic species; connecting the Santa Cruz Mountains with nearby ranges to sustain puma populations and support regional wildlife connectivity that will facilitate habitat shifts under climate change; and focused restoration of forests, wetlands, riparian areas, slough systems, agricultural valleys, and floodplains that protect biodiversity while delivering important co-benefits like for water quality and flood risk reduction. Strategies include protecting land, restoring habitat, and supporting long-term stewardship in fire-adapted landscapes, fragmented ecosystems, and working lands at the urban–agricultural edge.

Vision Plan stakeholders also emphasized the importance of investing in urban biodiversity, highlighting its role in promoting ecological health, reducing heat vulnerability, and addressing environmental inequities. Priorities include restoring urban tree canopies, maintaining mature trees, removing invasive species like ivy, eucalyptus, acacia, and French broom, and establishing native plantings in areas like Watsonville where green spaces are limited. Urban biodiversity also includes restoration of slough and wetland corridors within urban areas and enhancing habitat at the agricultural–urban edge to support pollinators, birds, and amphibians. Stakeholders also stressed the need to meaningfully integrate local tribes into project planning and implementation as much as their interest and capacity allow. This includes incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into project design, implementation, and communication to protect cultural sites and preserve native plant resources.

Measure Q funding can promote wildlife biodiversity and habitats through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but rather project types highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Conservation Planning and Protection of Rare Species and Habitats.** Recognizing the need to protect the county’s unique natural communities and rare, threatened, and endangered species, projects include plans and studies to identify biodiversity conservation priorities. These efforts will guide the development of land preservation and habitat protection strategies, along with related actions to implement them. Examples: habitat conservation and management plans, species recovery plans, land preservation strategies, and conservation design for wetlands, sloughs, riparian corridors, and agricultural–wildlife edge habitats.
- **Habitat Restoration and Enhancement.** These projects focus on improving the quality and function of degraded ecosystems to support native wildlife and plants.

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Efforts often aim to restore natural processes and improve ecological integrity. Examples: wetland, slough, and riparian habitat, prescribed fire and cultural burns, conservation grazing and forestry, floodplain restoration, watershed restoration to improve water quality and aid salmonid recovery, invasive species removal, woody debris installation, and native plantings to improve habitat value.

- **Habitat Connectivity.** Projects include efforts to limit habitat fragmentation, reduce human-wildlife conflicts, ensure that wildlife can move safely and freely across the landscape, and establish habitat and landscape linkages to support species movement and ecosystem resilience in response to climate change. Examples: wildlife crossing structures (bridges, species-specific road under-crossings); barrier removal (dams, culverts), conservation easements, coastal lagoon connectivity, daylighting streams to support fish passage and wildlife movement; wildlife-friendly fencing; and corridor projects across riparian floodplains and agricultural valleys.
- **Urban Biodiversity:** Projects that support plants and wildlife in more developed settings by providing essential habitat and movement corridors, while benefiting people through cooler temperatures, cleaner air and water, and enhanced mental and physical well-being through access to nature. Examples: urban greening, urban riparian corridor restoration, invasive species removal, forestry and tree canopy expansion, establishment of small habitat patches, wildlife-friendly lighting, education, hands-on stewardship, and safe wildlife crossings, and design of native habitat features in parks, schools, and along trail systems.
- **Land Management and Stewardship:** Projects and activities that are needed to maintain ecological integrity across public and private natural and working lands. Examples: long-term stewardship, maintenance, and monitoring plans and programs, shaded fuel break maintenance, invasive species control and weed management, community chipping and green waste services, outreach and assistance to engage landowners, farmers, and community groups in stewardship activities.

<MAP: Priority Geographies >

Santa Cruz County lies within a global biodiversity hotspot, with rare species and habitats that require urgent protection and restoration. Stakeholders prioritized wetland and floodplain restoration, recovery of salmon and steelhead, rare habitat stewardship, and urban greening to address inequities in biodiversity access.

Priority Geographies

- Pajaro River floodplain and estuary (multi-benefit habitat restoration)
- Watsonville Slough Wetlands (multi-benefit habitat restoration)

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- Pinto Lake (multi-benefit habitat restoration)
- Upper San Lorenzo River watershed and tributaries (fish passage, multi-benefit water supply and water quality)
- Sandhills and oak woodlands (rare species habitats)
- North Coast streams and estuaries, especially coho and steelhead streams (rare species)
- North Coast bluffs and coastal terrace prairies (rare species)
- Regional wildlife corridors across the Santa Cruz Mountains (habitat connectivity)
- Watsonville, Live Oak, and other urbanized areas in need of urban greening and tree cover (urban biodiversity)

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially where habitat restoration projects can increase equitable access to nature), and improve climate resilience. During the first five years of Measure Q implementation, biodiversity stakeholders expressed that funding should support impactful multi-benefit projects that result in measurable co-beneficial ecological outcomes—such as increased acres of restored, enhanced, and connected habitat across forests, wetlands, slough systems, riparian corridors, floodplains, and agricultural landscapes —while also delivering significant cultural and community benefits. By engaging community members in hands-on stewardship, delivering projects that include youth and opportunities for workforce development, and by telling stories of conservation successes, Measure Q can build collective capacity to accelerate delivery of biodiversity protection projects in the future. External funding sources, such as the California Wildlife Conservation Board, State Coastal Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and federal Farm Bill conservation programs can further leverage Measure Q investments. Additional five-year priorities identified by stakeholders include conservation of rare or endemic species and habitats, wetland restoration along the lower Pajaro River and Watsonville Slough area, combined with flood management and public access improvements, Pinto Lake restoration, coho salmon habitat restoration, and vegetation management that enhances fire safety and biodiversity.

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Parks, Recreation, and Public Access and Equity

Background and Context

Public parks and outdoor open spaces are essential community assets that provide retreat for our community from the built environment, places to promote community connection and partnership, protect natural habitats, sustain biodiversity, and provide ecosystem services such as clean air, water, and climate regulation. They preserve cultural and scenic resources for future generations and provide residents with equitable access to nature, supporting physical and mental health through recreation, relaxation, and social connection. Convenient and equitable access to parks and open space strengthens community resilience and provides place-based opportunities for environmental education and hands-on stewardship and volunteerism. These connections in turn foster an appreciation for nature and help instill a conservation ethic among the community, while also being places that build community.

Measure Q is committed to expanding safe, clean, and accessible recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors, recognizing the economic and tourism value of the county's scenic open spaces and the quality of life benefits they provide. Measure Q prioritizes projects that enhance public access to natural areas, improve and maintain existing parks, beaches, and recreation facilities, and provide diverse programming, such as after-school activities, senior services, and environmental education. The measure also supports efforts to improve mobility and transportation connections to parks, protecting beach access, and enhancing visitor experiences through well-designed and well-maintained amenities.

This thematic section was guided by key stakeholder engagement and local, regional, and state plans that address parks, recreation, and public access:

- Santa Cruz County Parks Strategic Plan (2018) and Update (2023)
- Watsonville Urban Greening Plan
- Watsonville Urban Forest Master Plan
- Pajaro Valley Park Equity Assessment
- Santa Cruz County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan
- California Outdoors for All Strategy
- Pathways to 30x30 California
- City of Santa Cruz Parks Master Plan 2030
- City of Watsonville Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan (2020)

Approaches to Measure Q Investment for Parks, Recreation, and Public Access and Equity

Many Santa Cruz County residents, particularly in the southern part of the county, in Watsonville and unincorporated communities, lack equitable access to quality parks,

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beaches, and open spaces. Park acreage and urban tree canopy are significantly lower in South County communities than in the North County. In Watsonville, safe multimodal access to the coast is also severely constrained. Levee top trails and pedestrian and bicycle transportation and safety improvements along West Beach Street were listed as significant priorities, along with improved recreational amenities and culturally relevant programming in the southern part of the county. Measure Q investments are also needed for capital improvements such as parks, trails, beach access, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades, and for programs that serve youth, promote community, health and wellness, and enhance environmental education.

Countywide, deferred maintenance, aging infrastructure, and limited funding have slowed the expansion and improvement of parks and recreational facilities despite strong community interest in better trails, beach access, and well-maintained parks and open spaces. Park and facility upgrades can incorporate low-maintenance, ecologically resilient designs such as native landscaping and sustainable trail construction to reduce future long-term maintenance costs. In addition to offering chances to invest in our parks, Measure Q also can provide opportunities to invest in urban greening, forestry, and climate-resilient green infrastructure projects can connect residents to nature closer to home and can address heat stress, air quality, stormwater management, biodiversity, and mental health. Addressing deferred maintenance and safety needs will help ensure long-term, inclusive access to high-quality recreational amenities.

Measure Q funding can promote equitable public access to parks, green spaces, and recreation program areas through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but rather project types highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Park Development, Enhancement, and Restoration.** Projects include creation of new parks or open space preserves, development of park amenities in existing spaces; improvement of existing park infrastructure to enhance health, safety, cleanliness, and comfort; or other restoration projects in parks, improvements or upgrades to enhance facilities, expand recreational options, or improve ecological conditions. Examples: constructing restrooms, picnic areas, and playgrounds; adding or restoring native landscaping and habitats; developing interpretive signage or other amenities to reflect local culture, language, and history; drinking water fountains; joint-use schoolyard partnerships, lighting, and safety improvements, and shade structures.
- **Trail and Access Improvements.** Projects that improve access to parks and open space through trail construction, wayfinding, and connectivity enhancements. Examples: multiuse trail connections, pedestrian and bicycle safety transportation

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improvements, improved parking and trailheads, directional signage, and ADA-accessible routes.

- **Equitable Access and Inclusion Initiatives.** Projects focused on removing barriers to access and participation, ensuring that parks and programs are inclusive of all users, particularly historically underserved populations. Examples: free or subsidized transportation to parks, culturally relevant design elements and programming, infrastructure improvements that meet universal design standards, all-abilities playgrounds, adult changing tables, multilingual signage, shade structures, water fountains and facilities that support popular community sports and gathering activities.
- **Community Engagement, Volunteer Stewardship, and Environmental Education.** Projects and programming that build environmental awareness and foster stewardship among youth, families, and communities. Examples: Junior Ranger programs, docent programs, interpretive signage, community volunteer days, nature-based school field trips, hands-on volunteer programs such as tree planting, trail work, erosion control, weed management, or other stewardship activities.
- **Urban Greening Improvements.** Projects that add or enhance vegetation and natural features in built environments to improve ecological, social, and climate benefits. Examples: rain gardens, bioswales, or other green infrastructure, tree planting and urban forestry, habitat and pollinator gardens, greening schoolyards, community gardens.
- **Coastal Access.** Projects that improve equitable access to beaches and coastal recreation through trail connections, coastal parking, and transit or shuttle service. Where direct coastal roads are constrained by surrounding agricultural lands, innovative low-footprint solutions such as shared rural access paths, off-road trail links adjacent to levees, and intermediate transit services (bike shuttles or community e-bike programs) are especially important. Examples: beach access upgrades, coastal trails, multilingual signage, and coastal shuttles.

<MAP: Priority Geographies >

Access to clean, safe, and culturally relevant parks and open space is a major equity issue in Santa Cruz County. Engagement emphasized South County and unincorporated neighborhoods as top priorities, alongside regional trail connections and coastal access improvements.

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Priority Geographies

- South County/Watsonville, including West Beach Road, Pinto Lake, and school-based sites (park development, trails, equitable access, urban greening)
- Pajaro Valley (trail connections and slough access)
- North Coast (new access points, regional trails)
- San Lorenzo River corridor (integrated park/trail opportunities)
- Underserved neighborhoods countywide (pocket parks, schoolyards, urban greening)
- Coastal beaches: West Cliff, Seacliff, Twin Lakes

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially those lacking access to parks or open space), and improve climate resilience. For local park and open space stakeholders and professionals who supported development of the Vision Plan, Measure Q success in its first five years would be reflected in visible improvements to parks and green spaces, particularly in park-poor and underserved communities in South County, with upgraded playgrounds, trails, and facilities that are safe, ADA-compliant, and culturally relevant. Additional priorities identified by stakeholders include urban greening and forestry in underserved neighborhoods, especially in South County, improved multi-modal coastal access in South County, creating partnerships with school districts to open campuses as public green spaces, and supporting community stewardship through programming.

Measure Q would serve as a catalyst for larger projects by funding planning, partnerships, and concept designs that leverage significant external grants. In particular, opportunities exist to align with Proposition 4 park bond funding, the California State Coastal Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the California Natural Resources Agency's Urban Greening and Outdoor Equity Programs, Proposition 68, Proposition 1 (water bond), FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, and other federal sources such as NOAA coastal resilience grants. By positioning Measure Q as a reliable source of local match, the County and its partners will be well-placed to compete for these larger state and federal funds.

At the same time, Measure Q investments will support interjurisdictional collaboration to launch new initiatives and ensure strong community engagement. Success will be evident through co-designed projects, clear public acknowledgment of Measure Q's role, and potential micro-grants that enable grassroots programming while capital projects advance.

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Expanded volunteer and youth workforce programs will further strengthen long-term stewardship and capacity for maintaining these community assets.

Agricultural and Working Lands Protection

Background and Context

Farms, working forests, and rangelands sustain the local economy, provide fresh food, and comprise the scenic and cultural landscapes that define much of Santa Cruz County's character. Agriculture is the largest economic sector in Santa Cruz County, supports over 8,800 jobs and generates \$654.7 million in crop value, with a total economic impact of \$1.566 billion when accounting for multiplier effects from processing and local spending. Beyond market production, these working lands provide essential ecosystem services such as habitat, flood protection, groundwater recharge, and community buffering from climate impacts like wildfire, flooding, and erosion.

Measure Q recognizes the essential role that farms, rangelands, and working forests play in sustaining ecological health, economic livelihoods, and quality of life for Santa Cruz County residents. Its approach focuses on enhancing stewardship of working lands through projects that protect and improve agricultural soils, bolster ecosystem function, safeguard water quality, reduce wildfire risk, and increase resilience to drought and flooding. The measure also supports technical assistance and outreach to private landowners, including smaller and historically underserved farmers, helping them plan and implement agricultural best management practices that improve the health of adjacent communities, strengthen environmental health, and promote long-term agricultural viability.

This thematic section was guided by key stakeholder engagement and local, regional, and State plans that address agriculture and working lands protection:

- Economic Contributions of Santa Cruz County Agriculture
- Healthy Lands & Healthy Economies: Natural Capital in Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma Counties
- Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan
- Santa Cruz County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan
- Santa Cruz County Regional Conservation Investment Strategy
- Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency plans
- Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy

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- California Healthy Soils and Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Programs
- Pathways to 30x30 California

Approaches to Measure Q Investment for Agricultural and Working Lands Protection

Stakeholders in the agricultural sector provided diverse and wide-ranging perspectives about the need for Measure Q funding. They agreed on the need to maintain protection for productive working lands from development or conversion to nonagricultural uses, given their vital role in the economy, local food security, and quality of life. Protecting timberlands through working forest easements or stewardship incentives helps keep local landowners in business producing some of the world's most strictly regulated timber, while also reducing the risk of residential development in the wildland-urban interface and the increased fire danger that can result if these lands are left unmanaged. The local timber industry may also play a larger role in the future by addressing accumulated biomass and built-up fuels that can lead to catastrophic wildfire. Farmland preservation is also an urgent priority but there is recognition that in a few strategic locations in South County, and in consultation with local growers and experts, it makes sense to retire marginal or flood-prone farmlands. Doing so creates opportunities to restore valuable wetland habitat and reduce water supply impacts, for example, while reducing growers' risks by focusing production on the highest-quality farmland.

Santa Cruz County is internationally recognized for agricultural innovations in organic production and sustainable farming practices that build soil health, increase water use efficiency, and protect water quality. Measure Q can build on this legacy by funding pilot projects, research, and best practices that enhance agriculture's ecosystem service benefits like pollination, erosion control, water quality protection, and wildfire risk reduction. The measure can also support invasive species monitoring and rapid response to help agricultural landowners respond to emerging threats like the Invasive Shot Hole Borer. It can also expand technical assistance for smaller and historically underserved farmers, helping them adopt sustainable practices and access new markets. Other long-range agricultural planning needs include ways to address labor shortages, improve farmworker housing, support generational land transfer, and develop the next generation of skilled workers and agricultural professionals. Finally, agricultural stakeholders recommended prioritizing programs to expand land access for small and beginning farmers, including BIPOC and immigrant producers, through leases, infrastructure improvements, and outreach and technical support. Doing so will help diversify and strengthen the agricultural sector, increase the capacity of local farmers to be effective land stewards, and support their efforts to nourish community members through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

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and other food security programs that directly benefit residents, while ensuring equitable access to shared infrastructure like processing, cold storage, and food hubs.

Measure Q funding can support agriculture and working lands protection through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but project types highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Working Lands Preservation.** This project type focuses on the long-term protection of agricultural lands and preventing conversion to non-agricultural uses to maintain the economic and ecological value of working lands while curbing sprawl. Examples: purchasing agricultural conservation easements,;
- **Sustainable Practices and Agricultural Productivity.** Projects that promote farming practices that enhance soil structure, fertility, protect water quality, and contribute to climate resilience and agricultural productivity. Examples: erosion control, irrigation efficiency, nutrient management, cover cropping, and reduced-tillage farming.
- **Habitat Enhancement on Working Lands.** Projects that integrate habitat features into farm, timber, and ranch landscapes, providing ecological benefits while maintaining agricultural operations. Examples: installing hedgerows and pollinator plantings, biochar runoff filtration systems, restoring riparian buffers, and enhancing stock pond habitat for native species and creating pollinator corridors and ag-wildlife edge habitats.
- **Technical Assistance and Incentives.** Projects that provide support to landowners and producers to adopt sustainable practices, often through training, tools, and financial incentives. Examples: cost-share programs, resource conservation district (RCD)-led workshops, and mobile irrigation labs and targeted outreach to small-scale, BIPOC, and immigrant farmers.
- **Economic Diversification and Infrastructure.** Planning and implementation of projects that can diversify and expand local agricultural production across the food system; establish physical infrastructure like cold storage, processing, or local composting; or expand programs to support local growers to sustain their operations. Examples: workforce development and training, CSA, food hubs, aggregators, farm incubators, agritourism programs.

<MAP: Priority Geographies >

Agricultural and timber lands are both a cornerstone of the local economy and essential to climate resilience. Plans and stakeholders emphasized farmland protection, regenerative practices, and timber stewardship to balance production with water quality, fire safety, and biodiversity.

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Priority Geographies

- Pajaro Valley (farmland protection, land repurposing, groundwater recharge)
- Corralitos and San Andreas agricultural areas (farmland protection)
- North Coast farmland (farmland protection)
- Urban-edge farms, countywide (farmland protection)
- North Coast and San Vicente Redwoods (timberland production, fire interface zones)

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially smaller and historically underserved farmers), and improve climate resilience. In its first five years, Measure Q can be especially impactful by providing a stable funding source to sustain high-demand agricultural programs, such as water conservation, soil health initiatives, and cover cropping, which currently face significant funding gaps. Complementary funding can be leveraged from established programs, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill programs, California Department of Food and Agriculture Healthy Soils and SWEEP programs, and the California Wildlife Conservation Board. By supporting the planning and implementation of multi-benefit projects that enhance agricultural productivity while delivering important ecosystem services, Measure Q can build on the County's legacy of innovation and demonstrate climate-smart agriculture in action. Ensuring that smaller and historically underserved farmers can access these programs through technical assistance will be key to success. Success can also be measured by visible early wins like projects that increase productivity and climate resilience, expand pollinator and habitat co-benefits on farms, repurpose marginal farmland to reduce flooding and improve ecosystem services, and expand community access to locally grown food.

Coastal Protection and Adaptation

Background and Context

The Santa Cruz County coastline, the shoreline of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, is known worldwide for its iconic beaches, surfing, and rugged and majestic forested coastal watersheds. These coastal resources face mounting risks from sea level rise, coastal erosion, and increasingly severe climate-driven events. Rising seas threaten to inundate low-lying areas and increase flooding risks; accelerate beach, bluff, and dune loss; and degrade critical habitats for shorebirds, fish, and other marine life. Coastal lagoons and estuaries are vulnerable to changes in salinity, sedimentation, and flooding, which can disrupt ecological functions and water quality. These impacts also jeopardize public access and recreational opportunities, underscoring the urgent need for adaptive, nature-based solutions. Measure Q's approach to coastal resource protection combines proactive

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adaptation to sea level rise and climate change with measures that sustain marine biodiversity, water quality, coastal access, and shoreline resilience. Strategies emphasize nature-based solutions, such as wetland and living shoreline restoration, floodplain reconnection, farmland repurposing in strategic locations, and restoration projects that provide both habitat and community benefits.

This thematic section was guided by key stakeholder engagement and local, regional, and State plans that address coastal protection and adaptation:

- Santa Cruz County Climate Action and Adaptation Plan
- City of Santa Cruz Local Coastal Program, including draft Beaches and Bluffs Policies
- Pajaro River Flood Risk Reduction Project documents
- Coastal Resilience Project and Sea Level Rise Vulnerability Assessments
- California Climate Adaptation Strategy
- State Coastal Conservancy Strategic Plan
- North Coast Facilities Management Plan

Approaches to Measure Q Investment

Coastal stakeholders view Measure Q as a critical opportunity to prioritize investments in nature-based solutions for coastal resilience and to promote equitable access to coastal resources. Stakeholders suggested that Measure Q funding should contribute to grey infrastructure projects only when there are substantial public benefits, such as new public access opportunities or when those investments produce substantial environmental benefits. Stakeholders recommended directing Measure Q investments toward coastal wetland, dune, and estuary restoration projects—with the Pajaro River, Watsonville Sloughs, and coastal lagoons identified as priority opportunities for multi-benefit projects that combine flood protection, habitat restoration, and public access. Other South County priorities include farmland repurposing, floodplain restoration, and restoration of the Watsonville Sloughs. In mid-county, stakeholders noted that Corcoran, Moran, and Schwann Lagoons are threatened by sea level rise and offer significant opportunities to implement multi-benefit projects to address flooding, improve transportation resilience, restore habitat, and meaningfully connect people to nature. Finally, Measure Q can fund watershed projects that enhance aquatic habitat and water quality in the San Lorenzo River, and support salmon recovery there and in coastal streams like Laguna, San Vicente, and Scott Creeks along the north coast and Soquel and Aptos Creeks in the mid-county.

In addition to promoting resilience and adaptation through nature-based approaches, Measure Q can help close key gaps in coastal access and education. In areas where agricultural lands border the coast and access is limited to a single road, projects such as levee-top trails, safe pedestrian and bicycle connections, and shuttle or transit options can expand equitable access while protecting working lands. South County residents lack safe and convenient pedestrian and bicycle access to the beach. Stakeholders offered that

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Measure Q can help fund potential levee trails and improvements along West Beach Road to connect residents to Palm Beach. In North County, while the Rail Trail will improve access to many beaches, there is additional need for Highway 1 parking, safe pedestrian crossings, and restrooms. Beaches and coastal parks would benefit from K-12 educational programming that fosters an abiding appreciation of the coast, workforce development projects that build the next generation of skilled coastal stewards, and community engagement programs that promote volunteer restoration and stewardship projects.

Measure Q funding can support coastal protection and adaptation through investments in the following types of projects. This does not represent a comprehensive list, but project types highlighted through the Vision Plan development process:

- **Nature-Based Shoreline Protection.** Projects in this category focus on restoring and enhancing coastal ecosystems, such as dunes, wetlands, estuaries, and tidal marshes to provide natural buffers against erosion and storm impacts. Examples: living shorelines, dune restoration, and tidal marsh enhancement.
- **Coastal Infrastructure Resilience.** This includes upgrades or redesigns of infrastructure to withstand sea-level rise, erosion, and storm surges, thereby protecting public access and essential services. Examples: elevating trail segments, installing surge barriers, and elevating coastal roads or utilities.
- **Flood and Sea-Level Rise Adaptation.** Planning and implementation efforts that address flooding from rising seas or extreme storms, including proactive land use changes. Examples: managed retreat strategies, restoring coastal lagoons and floodplains, and conducting adaptation planning studies.
- **Coastal Water Quality and Pollution Prevention.** These projects reduce the flow of pollutants and sediments into coastal waters, often by addressing upstream or shoreline sources of contamination. Examples: installing storm drain filters, sediment detention basins, habitat buffers, and retrofitting urban areas with green infrastructure.
- **Access Equity and Safety Enhancements.** Projects in this area aim to improve the safety, inclusivity, and accessibility of coastal spaces for all residents, especially underserved communities. Examples: building ADA-compliant beach pathways, multilingual signage, and safe multi-modal routes through agricultural corridors where coastal access is limited.

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<MAP: Priority Geographies >

The county's shoreline faces some of the most immediate climate threats, from sea-level rise and erosion to flooding and storm surge. Stakeholders prioritized estuaries, sloughs, and beaches as locations for nature-based adaptation that also improve access and protect vulnerable communities, especially in South County.

Priority Geographies

- Pajaro River floodplain and estuary (flood adaptation, water quality, coastal infrastructure resilience)
- South County beaches (shoreline protection, coastal resilience, access equity)
- North Coast, Davenport to Wilder Ranch (access, coastal resilience, sea level rise adaptation)
- Capitola and Santa Cruz coastal adaptation sites, including San Lorenzo River mouth (sea level rise adaptation)
- Coastal lagoons: Corcoran, Schwan, and Moran, and estuaries: Laguna and Scott Creeks (coastal water quality, flood and sea level rise adaptation)
- Watsonville Sloughs (flood and sea level rise adaptation, resilience)
- Countywide beaches (access equity, resilience)

Five-Year Implementation Strategy and Key Sources of External Funding for Coastal Protection and Adaptation

Priority will be given to the delivery of multi-benefit projects that can attract a variety of external funding sources, benefit disadvantaged communities (especially those that lack coastal access or are at risk from sea level rise or coastal hazards), and improve climate resilience. Stakeholders envision Measure Q success in its first five years as a combination of visible early wins in enhanced equitable public access, community engagement and education programming, , sea level rise adaptation, and strong regional collaboration and coordinated long-range planning. Prop 4 will provide an outstanding opportunity for external grant funding, as there is excellent alignment with the State Coastal Conservancy's strategic plan with the local need for integrated coastal resilience and public access projects. Additional priorities identified by stakeholders include improved coastal access in South County along West Beach Street, Palm Beach, or the Pajaro River levee, the creation of living shorelines or other nature-based solutions, estuary restoration, and restored creek connections under Highway 1 along the North Coast.

5. Vision Plan Implementation

The Measure Q Vision Plan provides the foundation for guiding Measure Q investments in conservation, climate resilience, and community well-being throughout Santa Cruz County for the next five years. This initial investment and implementation should align with the core prioritization principles that cut across all themes (as listed in Chapter 3), and the priority geographies and project types identified for each of the six thematic areas in Chapter 4. The success of Measure Q expenditures will ultimately be measured not only by the quality of individual projects but also by the strength of partnerships, the ability to leverage additional resources, and the inclusivity of its outcomes. Implementation will require a coordinated effort across County government, the Resource Conservation District, Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, cities, nonprofit organizations, and community-based partners.

A common reporting and accounting system will be developed as part of the implementation to provide a transparent visual accounting of how the Measure Q tax dollars are being spent, on what, and where. This will help inform the required reporting to the COAB and Board on an annual basis.

Leveraging Matching Funds and External Resources

Alignment with existing plans will enhance the effectiveness of Measure Q investments while maximizing external funding opportunities. Projects will reference regional and local planning documents such as the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, the Regional Conservation Investment Strategy, and the Pajaro Valley Park Equity Assessment. At the same time, the program must maintain flexibility to address unanticipated events such as wildfires, floods, or infrastructure failures. Measure Q can play a catalytic role by providing flexible early-stage funding to attract State and federal grants, including Proposition 4, CalFire, FEMA BRIC, and Coastal Conservancy programs. Investments in planning, permitting, CEQA clearance, and stakeholder coordination will help projects become competitive for external funds. Stakeholders emphasized that 'leverage' should be understood broadly, not just as direct matching funds, but also in terms of partnerships, in-kind contributions, and aligned resources.

<SIDEBAR: List of External Funding Sources>

Accountability and Ongoing Evaluation

To demonstrate impact and accountability, Measure Q will adopt a clear framework for measuring success. Grant and project metrics will encompass environmental outcomes

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(such as habitat restored or stormwater captured), social benefits (such as improved park access or youth engagement), equity indicators (such as investments in disadvantaged communities), workforce development, cultural relevance, and climate resilience. Both immediate outputs and long-term outcomes will be measured, ensuring that projects are sustained over time. Adaptive grant and program management will be critical, with feedback loops established to refine grant criteria, adjust capacity-building investments, and improve geographic targeting. By publicly sharing projects and results, the program will build trust, foster accountability, and continuously improve over its five-year cycle.

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