



# Saving Special Places Forever

A Vision Plan to Complete and Sustain the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt



City of San Luis Obispo  
Natural Resources Protection Program  
990 Palm Street  
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401





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## Natural Resources

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## Introduction

The City of San Luis Obispo has established a proud land conservation and natural resources protection legacy over the course of the past 20 years through its Greenbelt Protection Program. Currently, the City of San Luis Obispo has acquired approximately 3,850 acres of open space lands comprised of fourteen major properties held in open space reserve, natural reserve, agricultural reserve, or ecological reserve status. The primary purposes for these open space acquisitions is the protection of natural resources. Where appropriate and compatible with natural resource protection, these properties, collectively, also feature a trail network of both single-use trails and multi-use trails totaling over 50 miles. Open Space and Conservation Easements permanently protect another 3,400 acres of scenic hillsides, riparian habitat, and working agricultural landscapes. The Natural Resources Protection Program works in close collaboration with the Parks and Recreation Department's Ranger Service to form the "Open Space Team" in order to implement land acquisition projects, conservation planning, long-term stewardship, proper maintenance, and appropriate public use of the City's Open Space network within the Greenbelt.

## Natural Resources Roundtable

For the 2015-17 Financial Plan period, the City Council identified "Open Space Preservation" as a Major City Goal. This provided the opportunity to establish and convene a short-term, ad-hoc committee: "The Natural Resources Roundtable: the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Proceedings of the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt." Fifteen individuals agreed to serve on the Natural Resources Roundtable, representing environmental and conservation non-profit organizations, trail groups, academia and city advisory bodies, San Luis Obispo County staff, and at-large members of the community. Over the course of six meetings in 2016, the Natural Resources Roundtable had the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about a variety of topics pertinent to the Greenbelt Protection Program. This document reflects the major outcomes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Proceedings.

## What's in the Vision Plan?

It is the intent of *Saving Special Places Forever: A Vision Plan to Complete and Sustain the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt* to be an aspirational document by articulating high-level, thematic vision statements that can be achieved over the course of the next 20 years with continued City Council and community support. These are found on the following pages: 1.) Complete the Greenbelt; 2.) Protect, Restore, and Enhance Greenbelt Natural Resources; 3.) Foster a Culture of Stewardship; 4.) The Greenbelt is Relevant and Accessible; and, 5.) The Greenbelt is Sustainable. *Saving Special Places Forever* is not intended to be a management plan or day-to-day operating plan, nor should it be construed as being policy-setting or regulatory in nature. Rather, it is intended to provide implementation guidance that is consistent with other documents such as the Conservation and Open Space Element of the City's General Plan (2006), Open Space Maintenance Plan (2015), Open Space Regulations (1998), and various property specific Conservation Plans that can be found by contacting Natural Resources Program staff or by visiting the City's website.

## Greenbelt History:

1961 – City's first General Plan is adopted

1973 – Open Space Element added to the City's General Plan

1993 – Environmental Quality Task Force (EQTF) is established

1994 – Open Space Element Update

1995 – *A Vision for Sustainability in San Luis Obispo* and *Saving Special Places* reports published

1995 – 1996 - Natural Resources Protection Program and Ranger Service are established

1998 – Open Space Ordinance adopted

2002 – *Conservation Guidelines for Open Space Lands of the City of San Luis Obispo* is published

2004 – *Saving Special Places* report updated

2006 – Conservation and Open Space Element Update

2016 – Natural Resources Roundtable: The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Proceedings of the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt



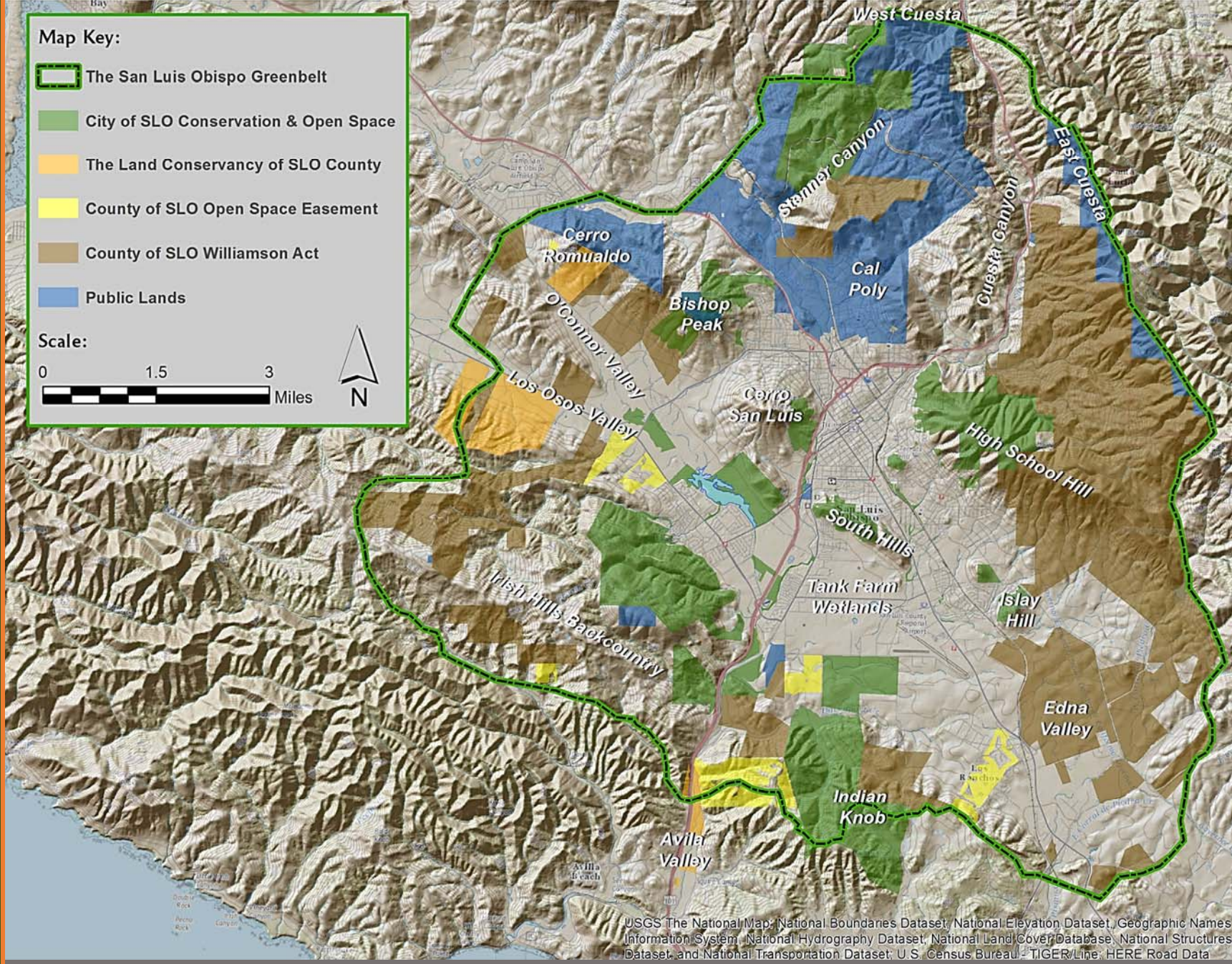


**Map Key:**

- The San Luis Obispo Greenbelt
- City of SLO Conservation & Open Space
- The Land Conservancy of SLO County
- County of SLO Open Space Easement
- County of SLO Williamson Act
- Public Lands

**Scale:**

0 1.5 3 Miles



USGS The National Map, National Boundaries Dataset, National Elevation Dataset, Geographic Names Information System, National Hydrography Dataset, National Land Cover Database, National Structures Dataset, and National Transportation Dataset; U.S. Census Bureau - TIGER/Line; HERE Road Data



## Vision Statement: Complete the Greenbelt

Important land, water, and diverse natural resource conservation values are protected by proactive land conservation efforts in priority areas of the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt over the course of the next 20 years.

## Indicators

The City Council and community continue to support and prioritize land conservation projects within the Greenbelt.

The Natural Resources Program maintains a portfolio of active and future prospects for land conservation projects.

The Landowner's Forum continues to meet annually as a means for the conservation community and Greenbelt landowners to build trust, explore opportunities, share experiences, and address areas of mutual concern.

## Successful Outcomes

Cuesta Canyon and Stenner Canyon – land acquisitions and conservation easements protect a major wildlife migration corridor and the headwaters of San Luis Obispo Creek and Stenner Creek, while also providing connectivity to the Los Padres National Forest and Santa Lucia Wilderness.

Irish Hills Backcountry – conservation easements securing intact working ranches will protect important migration corridors into and out of the Irish Hills, as well as the headwaters of Prefumo and Froom Creeks.

The Morros – safeguarding these iconic volcanic peaks and their rich natural resources through a variety of conservation tools will retain a vital component of San Luis Obispo's unique sense of place and our natural and cultural heritage.

High School Hill – key land acquisitions will complete a larger mosaic of existing protected lands, including natural springs and headwaters of local streams, as well as scenic view protection.

Prime Farmland and Working Landscapes – proactive acquisitions and conservation easement initiatives will protect working farms and ranches in Los Osos Valley, O'Connor Valley, East and West Edna Valley, as well as along the South Higuera corridor.

San Luis Obispo Creek and Urban Open Space – strategic acquisition of smaller sites, particularly along San Luis Obispo Creek, will help complete the Bob Jones Trail, while providing increased natural resource protection and positive behavior around these sensitive areas. Such linkages also provide the ability to walk between downtown, various historic / cultural sites, and City Open Space locations.

## Greenbelt Facts:

Total Greenbelt Area  
= 54,400 acres

City of San Luis Obispo  
Greenbelt properties  
= 3,850 acres

City of San Luis Obispo  
Open Space or  
Conservation Easements  
= 3,400 acres

Public Lands (e.g. Cal Poly  
lands, U.S. Forest Service  
/ Santa Lucia Wilderness,  
Camp San Luis Obispo,  
Bureau of Land Mgmt.)  
= 9,500 acres

Williamson Act Contracts  
= 15,000 acres

Other Conservation and  
Open Space lands (Land  
Conservancy, SLO County)  
= 1,350 acres

About 33,000 acres, or  
60%, of the Greenbelt  
enjoys some level and  
duration of conservation  
protection

80% of City of San Luis  
Obispo Greenbelt  
properties are designated  
for habitat protection, with  
the remaining area being  
trail, active management,  
cultural / historic, and  
agriculture designations





## Vision Statement: Protect, Restore, and Enhance Greenbelt Natural Resources

The outstanding aquatic, avian, botanical, and terrestrial wildlife natural resources found within the Greenbelt are protected, and those plants and animals requiring special efforts to restore or enhance habitat conditions receive priority attention and resources to ensure their long-term survival and recovery using best available science and practices.

## Indicators

The City maintains active dialogue and partnerships with non-profit organizations and the academic community, as well as State and Federal wildlife agencies (e.g. California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA Fisheries).

The City maintains current inventories of plants and animals found within the Greenbelt, and engages in regular survey and monitoring of special status, rare, threatened, or endangered species and habitats.

The City and its partners are active in prioritizing, planning, developing, and implementing restoration and enhancement projects for those plants and animals in need of attention.

## Successful Outcomes

Monitoring shows that wildlife corridors are open and intact, especially key linkages within and between the Greenbelt and the Los Padres National Forest and the larger Irish Hills ecosystems.

Recovery actions published by wildlife agencies are implemented and monitoring shows success, resulting in stable populations or down-listing of threatened and endangered species found within the Greenbelt.

The integrity of watershed functions and riparian systems are maintained and improved, resulting in increased habitat value and reduced water quality impairments and less frequent flooding events.

The common native species remain dominant by reducing current levels and new proliferations of invasive species.

Active human-caused threats to sensitive plant and animal receptors are addressed and ameliorated.

Conservation plans and restoration activities are closely aligned and coordinated with San Luis Obispo Creek watershed plans and the City's Stormwater Resource Plan, with the result being a holistic, "one water" approach.









## Vision Statement: Foster a Culture of Stewardship

The importance of land, water, and diverse natural resource conservation values are taught, understood, appreciated, and, therefore, protected by local citizens, visitors, and organizations as a way of life and through direct stewardship and educational activities.

## Indicators

The City maintains active partnerships with an array of community groups, non-profit organizations, academic and educational institutions.

Environmental education, natural and cultural history, and “citizen science” programming is available and prioritized.

Docent and Ranger-led outings and volunteer work days are continued, expanded, and are available on a regular basis to accommodate differing fitness levels, skills, and interests.

Information about natural resource values and appropriate public use of the City's Greenbelt Open Space areas in a manner consistent with applicable policy documents, is readily available in a variety of forms and media.

## Successful Outcomes

The City's partnerships are mutually beneficial with the result being more individuals participating in the stewardship and protection of the Greenbelt.

Opportunities to participate in educational forums and settings are available to all age groups and walks of life – from grade school kids, to college students, to anyone interested in life-long learning.

An Environmental Education Center / Ranger Station is created and serves as a hub for Junior Ranger Camp, for special research projects, and to provide interpretive opportunities to the general public.

Neighborhood groups are playing an active and meaningful role in advising the City about stewardship needs through reporting and feedback, resulting in action to improve conditions.

Negative behaviors and the need for enforcement of violations of the City's Open Space Regulations (San Luis Obispo Municipal Code chapter 12.22) are reduced, as voluntary compliance and appropriate use and behavior increases.

Measurable increases can be observed in the number of individuals participating in Docent or Ranger-led outings, work days, and other stewardship activities.

## Greenbelt Partners:

Americorps California

California Conservation Corps

California Native Plant Society – Central Coast Chapter

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Central Coast Concerned Mountain Bikers

Central Coast Grown

Central Coast Salmon Enhancement

CivicSpark

Coastal San Luis Resource Conservation District

Neighbors of Open Space

The Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo and *SLO Stewards*

The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County

The Santa Lucia Fly Fishers Club

The Sierra Club – Santa Lucia Chapter

Watershed Stewards Program





## Vision Statement: The Greenbelt is Relevant and Accessible

Greenbelt lands are protected and projects are shaped by inclusive and participatory planning, provide equitable and responsible access, and are relevant and important to all citizens.

## Indicators

Conservation plans and new policy documents are products of inclusive and participatory planning practices, and are conducted consistent with the City's Public Engagement and Noticing Manual (2015).

All user groups and demographics feel comfortable and welcome participating in plans and programs, as well as in their Greenbelt Open Space outdoor experiences.

A culture of shared use and mutual respect is strong and expected on all trails in the Greenbelt. Both single-use and multi-use trails of varying length and difficulty are available at numerous Greenbelt locations.

## Successful Outcomes

The Greenbelt remains well-supported over the long-term, socially, politically, and financially, because it continues to be relevant and accessible to both current and future generations.

Barriers to participation in planning, programming, and Open Space use are addressed, ameliorated, and reduced. This includes increased transit and mobility options for getting to Open Space, increased awareness and confidence among new Open Space users, and Open Space trailhead proximity within walking distance to all San Luis Obispo neighborhoods.

The City and its partners effectively address, survey, manage, and reduce passive recreational use impacts so that they do not significantly degrade or impair native plants and vegetation, wildlife, and the surrounding environment. This includes regional trail connectivity that spreads out use away from overly-impacted trails and trailheads.

New programs are developed that cultivate new, diverse, and younger audiences interested in outdoor opportunities within the Greenbelt that are responsive to changing demographics and future trends.

Total trips to Greenbelt Open Space locations match the multi-modal transportation objectives set forth in the Circulation Element of the City's General Plan (2014): 50% by motor vehicle, 20% by bike, 12% by transit, and 18% by walking, carpooling, or other forms.

## Greenbelt Use:

62% of Open Space users are from the City of SLO, 31% are from other communities in the County, 7% are from elsewhere.

49% of Open Space users have a college degree and 30% have a graduate degree.

37% of Open Space user households make over \$100,000 per year, 27% make \$50-100,000 per year, 18% make less than \$50,000 per year.

84% of Open Space users are white, with a variety of other groups comprising the remaining 16%.

Johnson Ranch, Bishop Peak, Cerro San Luis, and Irish Hills receive 90% of all Open Space use. These sites each likely see over 150,000 visits per year.

40% of Open Space users visit multiple times per week.

68% drive, 12% walk, and 8% bike to Open Space.

Source: *San Luis Obispo Open Space Survey* (Riggs et. al., 2015).





## Vision Statement: The Greenbelt is Sustainable

The Greenbelt and natural resource protection efforts are supported by appropriate staffing, funding, and institutions to ensure perpetual management and stewardship activities, while a healthy, functioning Greenbelt system also provides climate change adaptation and resilience benefits to the City and surrounding region as a whole.

## Indicators

There is continued support for the City's local revenue measure and any future general or specific revenue enhancement measures, as well as local, state, federal, and private funding initiatives and measures, that can provide financial resources for land acquisition, management, and stewardship of the Greenbelt and its natural resource values.

The Natural Resources Protection Program and Ranger Service are more closely aligned and integrated to provide a holistic and enduring Greenbelt Protection Program.

Important decisions effecting the Greenbelt are supported by scientific and technical advisers and trusted community leaders through the formation of an Open Space Committee that advises the City Council.

## Successful Outcomes

Each of the Vision Statement goals described in this document function together to provide social, economic, and environmental sustainability to the Greenbelt Protection Program and to the City and surrounding region as a whole.

The City has fostered a stewardship ethic within our local culture and has secured the necessary resources and institutions to sustain the Greenbelt in perpetuity for the benefit of future generations of plants, animals, and people.

The Greenbelt is refugia to many plants and animals in the face of climate change; healthy ecological systems are providing resiliency to disease, drought, catastrophic wildfires, predation, pollution, and invasive species.

The Greenbelt is playing an important role in protecting the City and its residents from the effects of climate change including flooding events, prolonged drought, and catastrophic wildfire, while modeling sustainable food production and helping build community and connections with the land.

The Greenbelt continues to retain the unique sense of place and character that defines San Luis Obispo, ensuring a thriving and healthy community for the future.

## The Greenbelt is

### Climate Ready:

Native perennial grasses, chaparral vegetation, trees and forests help to sequester carbon from the atmosphere.

Functioning watersheds and riparian systems are less prone to flooding, especially when flood plains are protected and restored.

Numerous natural springs are protected within the Greenbelt that provide critical summer stream flow during drought times.

Healthy ecosystems are less prone to catastrophic wildfire and other natural hazards, and are more resistant and resilient to pollution, disease, and invasive species.

Agricultural conservation projects and partnerships at City Farm and elsewhere demonstrate sustainable farming practices and soil conservation, and are a model for local food systems, community building, and connecting with the land.



## Saving Special Places Forever: A Vision Plan to Complete and Sustain the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt

Above: Laguna Lake and Irish Hills Natural Reserves from Cerro San Luis Natural Reserve. Photo by Brittany App.

Cover: Coast Live Oak at Bishop Peak Natural Reserve. Photo by Doug Bush.



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