GOLD RIDGE
RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

YEAR 2024 VOL 24
2024 ANNUAL REPORT

GRRCD staff and partners collecting native seed at Audubon Canyon Ranch's Modini Preserve.

STEWARDS OF THE LAND

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Letter from the Executive Director

SHARING THE JOY AND THE EFFORT

Transformation in our environment flourishes when individuals feel their actions matter, and when they are empowered with the knowledge, support, and connection. At Gold Ridge RCD, we believe that collective effort is not only more effective but also leads to lasting, and equitable change. This is an approach that brings joy, helps us address challenges together, and ultimately builds a stronger, and more resilient community.

In alignment with equity goals in our strategic plan, Gold Ridge RCD has been reimagining the ways we improve our soil, water, and habitat in our community. Historically, the RCD has primarily engaged with large-scale and high-impact projects. Recently we are developing programs that engage a wider array of community members through smaller, often incentive-based projects, citizen science, and education aimed at supporting groups in leading their environmental priorities.

Community-centered RCD programs:

- Monarch habitat improvement and monitoring
- Groundwater elevation monitoring
- Defensible space rebates
- Rainwater catchment rebates
- Mini grants to increase capacity fuel reduction through grazing
- Forest management workshops
- Early career opportunities
- Hiring our first dedicated Community Engagement Coordinator

We are deeply grateful for how this community comes together to care for one another and the environment. As we continue this journey, we invite you to share your thoughts and ideas on how we can improve and build a strong community.

Warmly,

Brittany Jensen

Brittany Jensen
Executive Director

WE'RE FUNDRAISING!

Donating to the RCD is a way of supporting stewardship of natural systems in your own backyard. Your donations allow us to deepen our offerings to the community and expand critical programs. If inspired, see the inserted envelope or donate online on our website.

FISCAL YEAR 2023–2024 FINANCIAL REPORT

Last year's expenses were just over $3.7 million.

Our work is funded through:

62%	State grants
21%	Federal grants
14%	Local contracts
2%	Foundations
1%	Fee-for-service
<1%	Property taxes
<1%	Donations

Total Revenue 2023-2024 Fiscal Year: $3,751,612

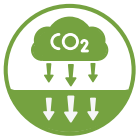
43%	Streamflow Enhancement, Clean Water & Water Conservation
29%	Wildlife Habitat Enhancement
14%	Fire & Forest Management
5%	Climate Resiliency & Carbon Sequestration
5%	JEDI, Community Engagement and Education
2%	LandSmart Farm Planning
1%	Organizational Sustainability
1%	Science, Monitoring & Planning

OUR PROGRAMS

Our vision is for a district with healthy and sustainable natural resources including clean sufficient water, diverse wildlife, resilient landscapes and thriving agriculture that are in balance with human communities, now and for future generations.

Agriculture

We partner with farmers and ranchers on a wide variety of projects to conserve and protect the health of our soils as the foundation for agricultural health and stability.



Climate Change Mitigation

We work to reverse carbon emissions by fostering innovation in climate mitigating farming practices. We also help prepare our community for the impacts of an already changed climate.

Education

We teach youth and adults natural resource conservation practices and cutting-edge land management techniques.

Forestry and Wildfire

We assist forestland managers in improving the health and fire resilience of our area's forests by managing fuel loads, invasive species, forest pests and wildlife habitat.

Water

We support water conservation efforts by reducing water pollution, increasing cool streamwater flows, conserving groundwater and managing stormwater.

Watershed

We help landowners to manage their sediment and nutrient contributions to waterways, improve flow within streams, and enhance riparian wildlife habitat within the multiple watersheds in our district.

Wildlife

We restore and enhance habitat for native wildlife, including riparian and wetland habitat restoration and promotion of on-farm biodiversity.

HERMAN HERNANDEZ: WALBRIDGE FIRE SURVIVOR BUILDS BRIDGES ACROSS COMMUNITIES

By deepening our engagement with the Latino community and creating more opportunities for education and involvement, we can ensure that our conservation initiatives are inclusive and accessible. Herman's story is just the beginning, and we're excited to continue this important work together, building a stronger, more resilient Sonoma County.

PHOTOS BY HERMAN HERNANDEZ

Dead trees and scorched underbrush on Herman Hernandez's property after the fire.

In 1970, a young Herman J. Hernandez bought his parents' summer cabin on the Russian River. It was a dream come true to live full-time in the riverside paradise where he had vacationed as a boy. The 47-acre property featured a small vineyard, once cultivated by Italian immigrants, space for a few cows, and a forest of redwood trees. Herman, the son of immigrants himself — his father from El Salvador and his mother from Germany — did his best to maintain the large property while balancing the demands of parenting, working in real estate, and organizing for Latino leadership in Sonoma County.

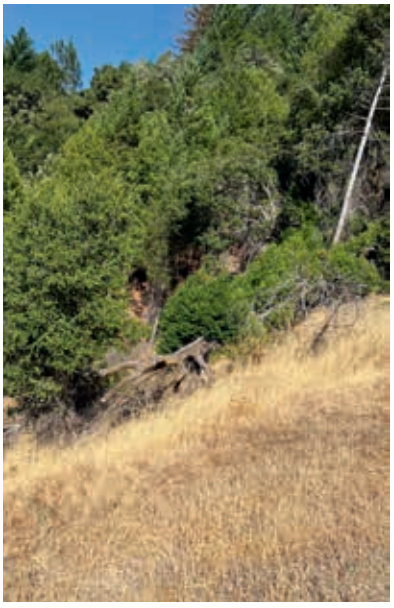
Before the 2020 Walbridge Fire, like many in Sonoma County, Herman didn't view wildfire as an imminent threat. Fires had affected his Guerneville property in the past — once in 1973 and again in 1989 — but these incidents were quickly contained. The Walbridge Fire, however, was different. It burned nearly half the property and forced a nearly month-long evacuation. This fire changed his perspective on land management and the need to collaborate with government agencies. For someone used to handling everything on his own, admitting that he couldn't manage it all was a turning point. Unsure of where to begin, he reached out to Tawni Tesconi at the Farm Bureau. She suggested he come to an upcoming workshop for wildfire victims. At the workshop, Herman heard presentations from the RCD and NRCS — his first introduction to working with a government program.

Initially skeptical, Herman began learning to navigate government-funded programs. Over time, he built trust with agency members and embraced the support these partnerships offered. With their guidance, he embarked on a journey of land restoration, participating in programs

ranging from post-fire cleanup and erosion control to planting fifty redwoods, hiring a grazier to keep down the grass and brush, and removing invasive plants like yellow star-thistle.

But Herman's journey didn't end with the recovery of his own land. He asked himself, "how many people need these services, but don't know they exist?" As a leader in the Latino community and the founder of Los Cien, he saw the broader need for equity and inclusion in environmental work. Reflecting on his experiences, Herman said, "I come from the Latino community where we continue our journey in struggles, our journey to come together to help each other." Applying his years of experience in community outreach, Herman is now focused on connecting environmental organizations, especially those that can provide financial and technical assistance, to Sonoma County's Latino community. All landowners, land managers, and residents who enjoy Sonoma County's natural resources should know about these programs.

By listening to landowners like Herman, we gain valuable insights into the challenges they face and how we can work together to develop solutions that benefit everyone. By deepening our engagement with the Latino community and creating more opportunities for education and involvement, we can ensure that our conservation initiatives are inclusive and accessible. Herman's story is just the beginning, and we're excited to continue this important work together, building a stronger, more resilient Sonoma County.



PHOTOS BY KIM BATCHELDER

Four years later, Herman continues to work to improve his property's resilience to wildfire.

"I come from the Latino community where we continue our journey in struggles, our journey to come together to help each other."

— Herman J. Hernandez

HERMAN HERNANDEZ

Following the 2020 Wallbridge Fire, Herman Hernandez's family gathered on their hilltop for a resilient Thanksgiving celebration.

LOCAL LANDOWNERS PROVIDE CRITICAL HABITAT FOR ENDANGERED FRESHWATER SHRIMP

Beneath the surface of select creeks in Sonoma, Napa, and Marin Counties, in the slow-moving waters of low-gradient, low-elevation stream reaches, live populations of the state and federally endangered California freshwater shrimp *(Syncaris pacifica)*. They live here, and nowhere else in the world. These small crustaceans, generally less than 2 inches in length, dwell among the submerged roots and overhanging vegetation of streamside trees and shrubs, as well as in undercut streambanks. Their gray-brown, translucent bodies make them virtually invisible, camouflaged as decaying vegetation.

Like many species, California freshwater shrimp face multiple threats, including introduced fish species, habitat loss due to reduced streamflow and channel modifications, and water quality degradation. Despite these challenges, and with limited restoration funding available for their protection, several streams in our district continue to host robust populations of this species. These shrimp, along with other endangered species like coho salmon and steelhead trout, serve as critical indicators of functioning ecosystems.

Behind this success are landowners whose thoughtful management of their properties, and the streams running through them, has allowed these species to thrive. By implementing effective water management practices and preserving natural habitats, they have created environments where wildlife can flourish. However, these same landowners often express frustration, feeling that their efforts are overshadowed by new regulations — regulations that sometimes fail to recognize the positive impact of their stewardship.

Sierra Cantor, who has served as Gold Ridge RCD's Ecologist since 2010, notes that while regulatory frameworks are essential, there is a missed opportunity to support and acknowledge the conservation efforts already being carried out by landowners.

The health of Sonoma County's watersheds is a shared success, built on the dedication of those who steward the land. While empirical data on the exact number of thriving California freshwater shrimp populations in the county is still lacking, their very presence is a positive indicator of the region's ecological vitality. As we continue to advocate for environmental protection, it is essential to recognize and celebrate the quiet, persistent efforts of those who make it possible for our lesser-known species to thrive.

PHOTOS BY SIERRA CANTOR

Left: A close-up view of a California freshwater shrimp in hand, showcasing its delicate size and translucent body. Center: Measuring a California freshwater shrimp. Right: Home to the endangered California freshwater shrimp.

JESSA KAY CRUZ, XERCES SOCIETY

LINKING AGRICULTURAL CLIMATE SOLUTIONS TO SUPPLY CHAIN AND MARKET DEVELOPMENT

Gold Ridge, Sonoma, and Marin RCDs are working closely with county governments (Ag Commissioners, County Cooperative Extension, and Climate Resiliency and Planning Offices), the agricultural community, the Agricultural Institute of Marin, and other agricultural support organizations to provide the technical, financial, and marketing assistance the agricultural community needs to continue to thrive and innovate into the future. The Sonoma-Marin Agriculture and County Climate Coalition, a pilot project funded by USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Grant Program, will collaboratively lead a $10 million investment to increase the pace and scale of climate-smart agricultural practice adoption and pilot regional approaches to supply chain and market development for local, climate-smart agricultural products.

More about USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Grant Program at bit.ly/3Zx1dnJ.

Over the last decade, Gold Ridge RCD has been building agricultural conservation partnerships and programs to ensure land managers have the necessary resources and knowledge to innovate and adapt to a changing climate. Working together, agricultural producers, scientists, and our local conservation organizations in Marin and Sonoma Counties were some of the first pioneers of climate-smart agriculture in the nation.

Entrepreneurial farmers and ranchers in Sonoma and Marin counties, often working closely with the RCDs and USDA NRCS, have shown how to successfully leverage science and public investments in climate-smart agriculture for direct marketing and supply chain development.

"USDA is proud to play a pivotal role through our new Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities… that position American agriculture as a leader in delivering climate solutions through voluntary, incentive-based, market-driven and collaborative approaches."

— United States Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

Technical Advisory Committees made up of technical experts and selected farmers and ranchers have been established to assist in program implementation and marketing.

Funding for climate-smart agricultural practices, farm and ranch planning assistance, and marketing support is available starting in Spring 2025.

Sonoma County Producer Interest Form

Above left: Hedgerows showcase the potential of agricultural land to enhance carbon sequestration and provide vital wildlife habitat. Right: Vineyard rows at Shone Farm, showcasing compost application as part of climate-smart agricultural practice.

Left: Monarch signs placed at our milkweed planting sites encourage people to report sightings of caterpillars and adult butterflies on iNaturalist, helping to track monarch breeding and migration Center: A monarch caterpillar observed in early September 2023 on milkweed planted at Crane Creek Regional Park. Right: A pollinator patch at Ridgway High School, planted through the School Garden Network's Schoolyard Habitat Program.

RECRUITING COMMUNITY SCIENTISTS IN MONARCH BUTTERFLY RECOVERY

Over the past two years, through funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB), the Gold Ridge RCD teamed up with the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation and numerous local partners throughout the North Bay to propagate and plant 8,000 milkweed plants at over 160 sites. This effort is dedicated to supporting the iconic, imperiled western monarch butterfly *(Danaus plexippus)*. Milkweed serves as the monarchs' sole larval host plant, meaning breeding adults require milkweed to lay their eggs. Restoring milkweed patches throughout their breeding zones is an essential strategy to promote the species' recovery.

Our region generally sees monarchs in the spring and fall, as they migrate to and from their coastal overwintering sites, which stretch from the Mendocino coast down to the Mexican border. However, we need more localized data to better determine when and where they are breeding and where restored milkweed patches are persevering.

Unlike many threatened species, monarchs are an ideal subject for community science efforts. Both caterpillars and adult butterflies are easily recognizable, approachable, and highly visible in the daytime, and they can make use of small habitat patches even in crowded urban areas. We are now working to recruit community scientists to report sightings of caterpillars and adult butterflies through the iNaturalist app.

Please join our team! After downloading the app and creating a user account, participants can add an observation by simply taking or uploading a photo and typing "monarch." Under "Projects," check "North Bay Monarchs" and "Western Monarch Milkweed Mapper" (the latter pulls up multiple fields, which don't need to be fully completed to record the observation). Observations will provide critical data to guide monarch recovery efforts. The monarchs thank you!

INCENTIVIZING DROUGHT RESILIENCE:
A PILOT PROGRAM TO PROMOTE RAINWATER HARVESTING TAKES HOLD

In May 2022, Gold Ridge RCD and its partners launched an innovative rebate program to incentivize landowners to adopt roof rainwater catchment systems that capture winter stormwater in tanks for dry season use. Implemented through the Sonoma-Marin Saving Water Partnership, the program promotes water conservation, provides alternatives to extractive water sources, enhances streamflow for wildlife, and fosters water use awareness throughout Sonoma County. This program builds capacity among both local landowners and homeowners to design and install these systems.

The program has proven to be a huge success, providing technical assistance and $150,000 in rebate funding for the installation of over 100 rainwater catchment systems throughout the county, ranging in size from 100 to 20,000 gallons and collectively totaling over 355,000 gallons in storage. Project partners Sonoma Water, Sonoma RCD, and Sherwood Engineers led development of a detailed training manual through the Qualified Water Efficient Landscapers (QWEL) professional certification, an EPA WaterSense program, and hosted a two-day training in December 2023 for 33 landscaping professionals. Another ongoing workshop series, facilitated by the Petaluma-based nonprofit Daily Acts, has served homeowners interested in installing their own systems, from 50-gallon "blue barrel" systems to those composed of 5,000-gallon HDPE tanks. The program also supported the City of Santa Rosa's ongoing rainwater rebate program, while launching a new rebate program through the City of Healdsburg.

The county-wide program, wrapping up in December 2024, was funded through the Department of Water Resources and the County of Sonoma's Climate Resilience Fund. Additional support continues to be available for residents in the Salmon Creek and upper Atascadero watersheds, through funding from the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

More information is available at:

Left: Rainwater Catchment System Right: A Qualified Water Efficient Landscapers (QWEL) professional certification training

WILLIAM SPANGLER

NATIVE SEED AMPLIFICATION IS A RESILIENCE STRATEGY

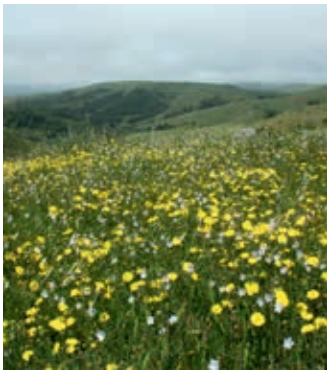
As climate change and habitat degradation continue to threaten California's native ecosystems, one key strategy for recovery is re-establishing native plant populations through seed amplification. Native seed amplification involves collecting seeds from native plants in wildlands and sowing them to produce a larger crop, whose seed can again be harvested and sown in their habitats. In this way, a small quantity of seed can be multiplied widely, helping to restore and strengthen vital ecosystems.

At Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (RCD), we're honored to reflect on the success of this program. With funding from the California Wildlife Conservation Board and the California Association of RCDs, this project brings together a dedicated team to collect and amplify seeds of the native species that are vital to our region's ecological health.

Throughout the project, we've worked closely with Marin and Sonoma RCDs, Heritage Growers, and local nonprofits and landowners to gather seeds from ecologically important native plants, such as narrowleaf milkweed, sky lupine, and blue wildrye. Seeds were collected from various locations across west Sonoma County and beyond — from local farms, private rural properties, and public lands.

WILLIAM SPANGLER

WILLIAM SPANGLER



Left page: Project partners collecting native seeds at the Modini Preserve

This page, top: Rose, Nicole, and Lynnette harvesting native seeds at Dierke Organic Farm for the seed amplification project Bottom left: Participants attending a tour of the Heritage Growers seed farm Bottom right: Flowering native plants.

The seeds from the wildland recollection were sent to Heritage Growers for amplification, where they received the meticulous attention needed to multiply them. The result will be a robust supply of seeds, ready to be sewn back into the landscape, where they will help restore critical habitats. Habitats rich with native plant species support pollinators and other wildlife while also enhancing the overall health of the broader ecosystem.

This project goes beyond just preserving biodiversity; it reinforces our commitment to building climate resilience and community connection. Furthermore, this provides an opportunity for landowners to get intimately involved with local plant populations and the steps required for native seed amplification, which will increase the effectiveness of future efforts. This collaborative experience further strengthens our connections with the local community.

The success of this initiative is a testament to the hard work and dedication of everyone involved. From our dedicated staff, who led the seed collection planning and efforts, to the many volunteers and landowners who contributed their time and energy, this has truly been a community achievement.

GOLD RIDGE
RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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GOLD RIDGE RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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¡Puedes leer este boletín en inglés o español!