Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG)
Joint Powers Authority Agenda

STAFF REPORT

To: ESCOG Joint Powers Authority

From: Elaine Kabala, ESCOG Executive Director

Subject: Approve Submission of the U.S. Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grant to the United State Department of Agriculture

Meeting date: February 26, 2025

Prepared on: February 19, 2025

Attachments: A) Draft U.S. Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grant to the United State Department of Agriculture

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ANALYSIS:

ESCOG staff has been collaborating with the Wildfire Coordinators for Mono and Inyo Counties to prepare an application for the U.S. Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grant to the United State Department of Agriculture. Grant managers have indicated the proposal is strengthened by regional coordination. If awarded, the program would establish the Community Wildfire Defense Program under the ESCOG, with funding to reduce hazardous fuels in 32 high-risk, low-income communities throughout Inyo and Mono Counties by expanding grassroots community resiliency efforts of regional Fire Safe Councils (FSCs) and Firewise USA communities (FWCs). The proposed actions are informed by the Inyo County and Mono County Wildfire Protection Plans. Finally, this funding will support sustainable inter-jurisdictional community wildfire resilience efforts established by the ESCOG Sustainable Recreation and Ecosystem Management Program, the Inyo and Mono County Wildfire Coordinators, the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance, and other partners working jointly to build wildfire mitigation capacity across jurisdictional boundaries.

The project aims to enhance wildfire resilience in Inyo and Mono Counties through three key goals: establishing a Regional Hazardous Fuel Removal System, developing a Communities Wildfire Defense Program, and empowering residents to mitigate wildfire risks. Over five years, the initiative aims to remove community level hazardous fuels through 320 cleanup events, process biomass into compost, and deploy specialized equipment such as chippers and an airburner for efficient disposal (heavy equipment will be operated by qualified County public works staff compensated by grant funds). It will also establish dedicated wildfire defense capacity within ESCOG, supporting inter-agency coordination, home ignition assessments, and GIS mapping for risk reduction. Additionally, the project emphasizes community engagement through educational events, volunteer training, and targeted fuel

reduction for high-risk homes. The total project cost is $5.5 million, covering equipment, personnel, waste disposal, and contractual services, ensuring a sustainable, long-term wildfire mitigation strategy for the region. Grant funds will be used over 5 years to reduce wildfire risk through hazardous fuel removal.

This will be achieved through a combination of Defensible Space Home Assessments performed by local Fire Department and CalFIRE staff, community outreach and education, strategic contracting for fuels treatments, and working with local County solid waste agencies to support 96 local fuel mitigation events in high-risk communities throughout the 2 counties by offering chipping and haul-away services during fuel mitigation events.

The Eastern Sierra Communities Wildfire Defense Program is a project designed to bridge the gap between ongoing/proposed landscape-scale hazardous fuels reduction work on federal, state and Tribal lands and, the limited to non-existent efforts to remove excess hazardous fuels from within local communities in Inyo and Mono counties. Although there are several multi-agency, collaborative public lands' fuels reduction projects in various stages of development/implementation in the region, including but not limited to the Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Project (ESCCRP) and various hazardous fuels reduction projects on BLM, Inyo National Forest, Tribal, state and private/non-profit lands, there has been limited, coordinated and consistent to-scale efforts to remove hazardous fuels from within local communities. Although there has been progress (eight new Firewise Communities have been recognized and 15 more are under development at the time of this writing), the existing FSC and Firewise communities capacity to do at-scale fuels reduction work is limited, due to a lack of regional, county and community capacity and funding.

BUDGET IMPACTS:

If awarded, the ESCOG would administer the $5.5 million grant over 5 years, which includes $946,400 for (2) FTE Wildfire Coordinator positions, $722,541 for indirect costs including ESCOG administration, $2.1 million for contractual services for implementation, including compensation for County Public Works staff participation.

LEGAL REVIEW:

ESCOG Counsel Grace Chuchla has reviewed this item and found that it complies with the law.

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Board approve submittal of a grant application to the US Forest Service for their Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWPG) Grant Application, and if awarded with the requested match waiver, authorize the Chairperson's signature on all pertinent documents, subject to legal review. The Total Project Cost is not to exceed $5,539,481.