



Conservation, Environment and Public Trails Grant Guidelines

The Conservation, Environment and Public Trails Grant Program supports conservation, environment, and public trails projects across Santa Barbara County, with a preference given to those on the South Coast of Santa Barbara County from Point Conception to the Ventura County line and the Santa Ynez Valley.

From the historic environmental stewardship of the Chumash people in the region to the birth of the modern environmental movement in response to the 1969 oil spill disaster, Santa Barbara County, and its nonprofits, have a long history of caring for the environment and preserving the scenic beauty, incredible biodiversity and ecosystems of the area for future generations.

Preserving open spaces, restoring delicate habitats, and expanding public trail systems are critical priorities, especially during a period of uncertainty in federal funding for land conservation and environmental programs across the country. Community-led conservation efforts help protect coastal regions, wetlands, grasslands, woodlands, and the species that inhabit these areas. Trails and educational programs help facilitate the public's ability to respectfully enjoy nature and foster environmental stewardship.

With our funding partners, the Foundation is offering grants to increase environmental sustainability, land conservation, habitat restoration, public trails, and ecosystem health.

Eligibility Requirements

- Organizations must serve **Santa Barbara County** and have at least **one (1) year of operations** in the County.
- Organizations must implement new or existing projects to address **conservation, environment, and/or public trails** (project does not need to address all three areas).
- Organizations must demonstrate **sound fiscal management** (e.g., financial audits/reviews, board oversight) and **financial sustainability** (e.g., diversified funding, reserves).
- Organizations must be **certified as tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3)** of the Internal Revenue Code **or use a fiscal sponsor with 501(c)(3)** tax status. Applications that do not contain a valid EIN (tax ID) number will not be considered. Organizations using a fiscal sponsor must review the [Eligibility Criteria & FAQs](#) for additional information and instructions.

Priorities

The strongest projects will:

- Create or expand partnerships, networks and collaborations for greater efficiencies, better delivery of programs, or fresh approaches to solve problems or address needs, gaps, or opportunities.
- Incorporate a community involvement, awareness, or education element¹ with the goal of increasing access.
- Align with or be a part of a larger plan or strategy such as Santa Barbara County's Conservation Blueprint, 2030 Climate Action Plan, Santa Barbara County Food Action Plan, Pathways to 30x30 California, etc.
- Have developed short-term and long-term strategies for addressing identified organizational needs.
- Include as application attachments (uploaded to SmartSimple) applicable relevant supporting documents such as: relevant sections of plans, public meeting rosters, meeting minutes, land managers support (written letters, MOUs, etc.), other potential funding sources, partnership agreements (if formalized).

Criteria by Type of Project

Conservation Project Criteria:

Projects should align with a conservation plan or strategy and be recognized as a valuable component of a longer-term plan or vision.

Illustrative Project Examples

- Projects providing permanent (or long-term) protection for lands with high ecological or agricultural value.
- Early-stage land conservation activities including planning, feasibility studies, appraisals, environmental due diligence, etc.
- Projects fulfilling a critical link for species, habitats, or ecosystem function.
- Community-based restoration projects in wetlands and streams, coastal areas, grasslands, woodlands and other natural areas.
- Projects related to climate resilience, habitats, or threatened species conservation with an educational component.
- Piloting or expanding projects that demonstrate best practices in conservation.

¹ CEPT funds are not intended for 100% education projects. See also "Grant Limitations".

Environment Project Criteria:

Projects must address a specific challenge or opportunity related to environmental sustainability, climate resilience, or innovative approaches to land, agriculture, forestry, or water management; including planning, implementation, and investigation or research of best practices.

Pilot implementation or facility improvement projects should serve as a model that can be replicated and/or scaled up in the future.

Illustrative Project Examples

- Data collection to support planning and policy solutions to address environmental challenges faced in the County.
- Projects that address ecosystem resilience to climate-related impacts such as drought, wildfire, flooding, or sea level rise.
- Convening, coordination, or establishment of partnerships that advance environmental sustainability or biodiversity across the region.

Public Trails Project Criteria:

Projects must demonstrate at least one of the following: ecological value, aesthetic improvement, or expanded public access through trails, pathways, or related infrastructure.

All permits and landowner approvals required to implement the proposed project must be secured or formally in process at the time of application.

Projects may be part of a larger, longer-term effort, but the specific scope funded by this grant must reach completion within the grant period.

Applications may include planning for new trails, new trail construction, trail restoration, trail head facilities, lease of heavy equipment, purchase of hand tools to construct/renovate trails, and water trail facilities.

Illustrative Project Examples

- Construction or restoration of trails, trailheads, or wayfinding infrastructure that improves safety, accessibility, or user experience.
- Habitat restoration within a trail corridor that enhances ecological value alongside public recreational use.
- Planning or design for new trail segments that expand public access to natural areas or connect existing trail systems.
- Signage along trails that builds environmental awareness and stewardship.

Funding Amounts and Duration

The maximum award for Conservation, Environment and Public Trails grants is **\$25,000**. Please note that based on funding availability, award amounts could be less than requested. The grant period is up to one year from the award date and reporting requirement will be noted in the award letter.

Grant Limitations

Grants are not intended for:

- Projects that are 100% education focused;
- Direct purchase of land or easements that have raised less than 90% of funds required;
- Direct support to government agencies or private landowners (grantees must be a 501(c)(3) organization and serve as the primary project lead agency; public or private entities may be part of a collaboration);
- Endowment;
- Advocacy and lobbying activities.

Please visit the [Eligibility Criteria & FAQs](#) for a complete list of what the Foundation does not fund.

Important Dates

The Foundation will offer open space – no appointment necessary – for organizations to bring their questions about the application during “Office Hours” in each region of the County.

Tuesday, July 21, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.	Office Hours: SBF Santa Barbara Office
Wednesday, July 22, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.	Office Hours: Lompoc’s South Side Coffee Co.
Thursday, July 23, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.	Office Hours: SBF Santa Maria Office
August 6, 2026	Application Deadline
Late November 2026	Funds Awarded

Application Process

Applications must be submitted through our SmartSimple grant application, which includes the following documents:

- Organizational profile
- Program Budget Form
- Narrative answering seven (7) questions

Refer to our website for more information: <https://sbfoundation.org/nonprofits/how-to-apply/>

Application Questions

1. Please provide a project description, including the site location and ownership (public or private), if applicable.
 - Identify the staff, volunteers, or contractors who will manage and implement the project and their relevant qualifications.
 - Describe the project in enough detail for reviewers unfamiliar with the site or issue to understand what you are proposing to do and where.
2. What are the project's goals and desired outcomes? Please provide a timeline of key milestones and activities for the grant period.
 - Clearly identify what success looks like at the end of the grant period.
 - Note that the grant period is up to one year from the award date
3. How does this project align with or contribute to a broader strategy, plan, or longer-term effort?
 - This could be an external plan or an internal organizational strategy.
 - If this project is part of a longer-term effort, describe how it relates to future phases of work.
4. How will this project be sustained or managed after the grant period ends?
 - Describe any post-completion management plan, maintenance responsibilities, or financial sustainability strategy for the project.
 - If the project is a discrete, one-time activity with no ongoing management needs, please explain.
5. Identify your project partners and describe the role and responsibilities of each. How does this collaboration strengthen the project, and how does your work avoid duplicating efforts already underway by others?
 - If your project does not involve formal partners, explain how you have assessed the landscape of existing efforts and confirmed there is no significant overlap.
6. How will this project provide a community benefit or an ecological, aesthetic, or other improvement? How will the public be able to access or engage with the results of this project?

- Describe the anticipated benefit to the broader community and how people will be able to experience, use, or learn from the outcomes of the project.
7. How will you evaluate the impact of these funds? Please explain:
- How will data be collected and analyzed – this can include specific tools, documents, databases, budgets/financials, etc.?
 - How will you use these findings to inform decisions or improvements?

Contact Information

For questions regarding the Conservation, Environment and Public Trails Grant program area and funding eligibility, please contact Jamie Perez, Program Officer, at JPerez@SBFoundation.org or (805) 880-9395.

For technical assistance, please contact Hazel Naftzger, Data and Evaluation Coordinator at (805) 880-9377 HNaftzger@SBFoundation.org.

Conservation, Environment and Public Trails Scoring Rubric

Scoring Rubric | Scale: 4 (Highest) to 1 (Lowest) | 5 Criteria | Maximum Score: 20 Points | All criteria weighted equally

Criteria	4 — Exceptional	3 — Strong	2 — Developing	1 — Insufficient
Alignment with Program Priorities <i>Score based on the project type. See project-type scoring notes below.</i>	Project strongly aligns with stated program priorities for its project type. Clearly addresses one or more priority criteria with compelling supporting evidence. Project fits within or meaningfully contributes to a larger plan or strategy.	Project aligns well with program priorities for its project type. Addresses relevant criteria with adequate supporting evidence. Some connection to a broader plan or strategy is evident.	Project partially aligns with program priorities. Supporting evidence is limited or the connection to program area priorities is unclear. Tenuous or absent link to any larger plan or strategy.	Minimal or no alignment with program priorities. Project does not clearly fit Conservation, Environment, or Public Trails criteria, or lacks sufficient supporting rationale.
Strategic Vision & Goals	Presents a clear and comprehensive strategic vision with specific, measurable goals, actionable strategies, and a well-defined project timeline for the one-year grant period. Milestones and key activities are clearly articulated. Demonstrates a proactive, forward-thinking approach that strengthens long-term impact, organizational sustainability, or broader systems that influence community and environmental outcomes.	Provides a solid strategic vision with defined goals, strategies, and a general project timeline. Key milestones are present though some may lack specificity. Demonstrates thoughtful planning for the grant period, though some elements may lack full detail or longer-term perspective.	Describes general goals and approaches but the project timeline is vague or incomplete. Milestones are unclear or missing. Appears more reactive than proactive, with limited evidence of forward planning or broader impact beyond immediate project delivery.	Goals are vague or lack a clear strategic framework. No clear project timeline or milestones provided. Approach appears primarily reactive to immediate demands without a plan for longer-term progress.
Collaboration & Sector Coordination	Demonstrates strong and meaningful collaboration with other organizations, agencies, landowners, or community groups. Clearly articulates awareness of what others are doing in the space and how the project is distinct or complementary; actively avoiding	Participates in solid collaborative relationships that strengthen project implementation. Shows some awareness of the broader landscape of organizations or efforts in	Engages in some collaboration, such as referrals, shared resources, or participation in regional networks. Partnerships are noted but little attention is given to	Minimal or no meaningful collaboration described. No evidence of awareness of other actors or efforts in the space. Risk of duplication is unaddressed.

Criteria	4 — Exceptional	3 — Strong	2 — Developing	1 — Insufficient
	duplication of effort. Partnerships demonstrably improve project implementation, expand reach, or address gaps. May contribute to sector coordination, shared learning, or collaborative leadership in conservation, environment, or trails work.	the space, and makes a reasonable case for how duplication is avoided, though this may not be fully developed.	what others are doing in the space or how overlap with existing efforts is avoided.	Organization appears to operate largely in isolation from relevant partners or networks.
Community Benefit & Access	Project demonstrates meaningful and broad community benefit. Actively incorporates access elements that increase public engagement with conservation, environment, or trails. Clear evidence that the broader community can meaningfully participate in or benefit from the project.	Project provides notable community benefit with some attention to public access and engagement. Evidence of community reach is present but may be limited in scope or depth.	Community benefit is modest or indirect. Access components are minimal or underdeveloped. Limited consideration of how the broader public will engage with or benefit from the project.	Little to no demonstrated community benefit. No meaningful public access component or consideration of broader community engagement.
Measurement, Evaluation & Learning <i>Applicants should identify which output & outcome metrics are relevant to their project type.</i>	Provides a detailed, feasible plan with specific data collection methods and tools clearly identified (e.g., databases, field monitoring protocols, surveys, tracking systems). Describes clear, realistic processes for analyzing data and demonstrates understanding of how findings will inform decisions and project improvements during the grant period.	Presents a solid plan with defined data collection methods, tools, and analysis approaches. Includes how findings will be used to inform decisions, though some elements may lack specificity.	Provides a basic plan with some identified data collection methods and general analysis approaches. Limited detail on how findings will inform project decisions or improvements.	Plan is vague or entirely absent, lacking specifics on data collection tools, analysis methods, or how findings will be used. Feasibility is questionable or the connection between evaluation and learning is unclear.

Criterion 1 — Project-Type Scoring Notes

Reviewers should apply the guidance below when scoring Criterion 1, based on the project type indicated in the application.

Conservation Projects

Assess whether the project aligns with a conservation plan or strategy and is recognized as a valuable component of a longer-term plan or vision. Consider the strength of the ecological or agricultural rationale, the degree to which the project contributes to species, habitat, or ecosystem function, and how clearly the applicant connects their work to a broader conservation effort or strategy.

Environment Projects

Assess whether the project addresses a specific challenge or opportunity related to environmental sustainability, climate resilience, or innovative approaches to land, agriculture, forestry, or water management. Consider the clarity of the problem or opportunity being addressed, the soundness of the approach, and the potential for findings or results to inform broader planning, policy, or practice.

Public Trails Projects

Assess whether the project demonstrates ecological value, aesthetic improvement, or expanded public access through trails, pathways, or related infrastructure. Confirm that all required permits and landowner approvals are secured or formally in process, and that the specific scope funded by this grant can reach completion within the grant period.

Scoring Guide

Score Range	Priority Level	Description
18–20	Priority for Funding	Exceptional applications that strongly meet all criteria. Compelling evidence of project merit, clear strategy, strong organizational capacity, and meaningful community benefit.
14–17	High Consideration for Funding	Strong applications meeting most criteria well. Solid project strategy with good evidence of capacity and community benefit, with minor gaps.
9–13	Consider for Funding	Solid applications with some areas for improvement. Addresses program priorities but may lack depth in strategy, evidence, or capacity.
5–8	Low Priority; May Fund if Resources Allow	Significant gaps in one or more criteria. Limited alignment with program priorities or unclear organizational capacity.
0–4	Does Not Meet Criteria for Funding	Insufficient alignment with program goals. Project purpose unclear, lacks strategic direction, or does not meet eligibility requirements.