Measure Q FY 2026–2027 Grant Program Guidelines



Administered jointly by the County of Santa Cruz
Office of Response, Recovery & Resilience (OR3)
and the Department of Parks, Open Space & Cultural Services (Parks)

1. Program Purpose & Authority

Measure Q was passed by Santa Cruz County voters in November of 2024 to advance our community's long-term resilience, environmental health, and access to parks and open space. Generating approximately $7 million annually through a special parcel tax of $87 per parcel per year, 40% of revenue or approximately $2.7 million annually is expended through the Measure Q competitive grant program to support projects and programs that contribute to improved water quality, strengthened wildfire resilience, enhanced habitat protection, and create equitable access to parks and natural spaces throughout Santa Cruz County. The Vision Plan is the guiding document for the Measure Q grant program and functions as the program's roadmap, translating the goals of the Santa Cruz County Safe Drinking Water, Clean Beaches, Wildfire Risk Reduction, and Wildlife Protection Act into clear investment priorities for the next five years. It draws from existing County and State plans to identify where Measure Q funds can have the greatest impact, and all grant proposals must show how they support the Plan's priority actions and community-identified needs

These guidelines outline the structure, requirements, and administrative procedures used to allocate funding for the FY2026-27 grant cycle. All funded projects must align with the Measure Q Vision Plan and demonstrate benefits to residents, natural resources, or ecosystems within the County. As the second annual grantmaking cycle, these guidelines also reflect a continuous improvement process and incorporate elements of the after-action review (AAR) recommendations and feedback received during the FY2025-26 cycle. The County anticipates refining and improving the program over time based on community engagement, implementation lessons, and evolving needs.

All grant application content, evaluator scores, awards and reporting content will be publicly available and viewable upon request to ensure public transparency and accountability in the implementation of the Measure Q grant program.

2. Program Structure & Funding Tiers

The Measure Q Grant Program consists of two tier levels designed to support both emerging community-based initiatives and pilot approaches alongside larger-scale implementation projects with substantial countywide or regional impact.

Tier 1 - Community Catalyst Grants, ranging from $10,000 to $50,000

Tier 1 grants are intended to help organizations test new ideas, expand local stewardship efforts, deliver community education, or complete smaller project, restoration or planning activities.

Projects with *exclusively* educational or park/ recreational access outcomes (such as environmental education programs, field trips or transportation to parks for disadvantaged youth) are restricted to Tier 1 funding in the FY2026-27 cycle.

The County will aim to award approximately 10% of available grant funding to Tier 1 projects. The final amount will depend on the number and scores of Tier 1 applications received.

Tier 2 - Community Impact Grants, ranging from $50,000 to $600,000

Tier 2 grants support more complex, multi-benefit projects such as large scale habitat restoration, fuel reduction along critical wildfire interfaces, watershed enhancement work, or capital improvement projects with widespread and measurable community benefit.

Tier 2 Community Impact Grants also incorporate two dedicated annual funding allocations established by the Measure Q Act:

- **At least $600,000** for projects supporting forest health, fire resilience, natural habitat restoration, and public access serving San Vicente Redwoods, the County's largest conservation easement.
- **At least $600,000** for up to 3 grants benefiting residents in the Pajaro Valley, including areas within one mile of the Watsonville Slough system, Pinto Lake, and the Pajaro River and its tributaries. This amount represents a floor, not a ceiling of investment. Because the 2025-30 Vision Plan prioritizes funding for

disadvantaged communities, especially in South County, more than $600,000 may be awarded to eligible Pajaro Valley projects in any given cycle.

These dedicated allocations ensure that Measure Q resources directly address the County's highest-priority landscapes facing wildfire vulnerability, flooding risk, and water quality challenges.

The FY 2026-27 Grant Program is proposed for a 12-month funding cycle, meaning the County will undertake another solicitation and grantmaking cycle in FY2027-28. Future solicitations may shift this program to a 2-year funding cycle depending on application volume, community needs and upon further consideration by the Citizens Oversight Advisory Board (COAB)

3. Eligibility Requirements

Eligible applicants are limited to the entities defined in the Measure Q Act:

- Public Agencies,
- Nonprofit Organizations described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and
- Tribes.

Smaller community organizations without 501(c)(3) status with project implementation capacity may apply in partnership with an eligible fiscal sponsor.

All applicants must propose projects that qualify as "Eligible Projects" under the Act, County Code Chapter 4.65 outlines the measure, and 4.65.040(B)(1) provides further detail (HERE) meaning activities that implement the goals of Measure Q through planning, feasibility, acquisition, construction, development, restoration, stewardship, maintenance, or related work.

Projects must occur within Santa Cruz County and demonstrate clear public benefit to the County's residents, watersheds, natural resources, or ecosystems.

Applicants must demonstrate the administrative and fiscal capacity to complete the proposed work, comply with grant agreement requirements, and provide accurate reporting and documentation as required by the County.

Grant applications are not required to have permits associated with the proposed project obtained prior to application or award; however, identifying applicable permitting process(es) and requirements is a mandatory component of the application and may impact applicants' feasibility scores.

4. Application Requirements

Applicants must submit a complete application online through the Measure Q website. Required components include a detailed project narrative, a comprehensive budget worksheet, a proposed timeline and work plan, project site map(s) or geographic descriptions, outcome and effectiveness metrics (such as: acres treated, community engaged, miles/feet of trail), a description of the population(s) and local communities served, and organizational information. CEQA documentation must be included when applicable.

The application format will follow the scoring rubric outlined in the following section. All application content will be made publicly available during award consideration after initial scoring and recommendations have been made.

Letters of support from partners, neighbors, or collaborating organizations are strongly encouraged. Applications must be complete and submitted by the stated deadline to be considered for funding.

Organizations without 501(c)(3) status may apply through a fiscal sponsor. In that case, the fiscal sponsor is the applicant and must sign the application.

The applicant must be the entity that enters into the Measure Q grant agreement if the application is selected for funding. Grant awards may not be transferred or reassigned to another organization after selection, although awarded applicants may work with approved partners, subcontractors, or collaborating organizations to carry out the funded project.

5. Consecutive Funding Limitations

Measure Q funds eligible new projects with clear deliverables. It is not intended to support fixed program operating costs, administrative overhead, or permanent staffing not tied to specific project delivery.

Applicants who were awarded grant funding in the last cycle may not apply for the same project in the next cycle, unless the application is for a new project, or it adds new deliverables, service areas, or outcomes beyond the funded project. The application must explain what is new. This information will be verified by County staff before the application can move on for competitive evaluation / scoring and consideration for a grant award.

Applications submitted under the San Vicente Redwoods set-aside are not subject to this limitation, since the set-aside supports ongoing stewardship and maintenance of the property.

6. Scoring Rubric (100 Points)

Applications will be evaluated using a 100-point scoring system. Tier 1 applications are assessed based on project feasibility, alignment with the Measure Q Vision Plan, community benefit, and demonstrated innovation / capacity. Tier 2 applications use an expanded set of scoring categories to reflect increased project complexity and expected impact. Reviewers may also assign bonus points for proposals that demonstrate strong partnerships, high outside funding leverage ratio, or efficient use of funds, such as Tier 2 projects proposing indirect costs below 10%.

Application scores will serve as the primary basis for developing award recommendations. County staff will present a single recommendation to the COAB that draws from top-ranking projects and applies a series of portfolio-level values to ensure a balance of project types, geographic reach, and representation of the 3 Vision Plan priority themes. Any recommendation to fund a lower-ranked project over a higher-ranked project will provide a documented reason and will be shared with the COAB, the Board of Supervisors, and the public.

Tier 1 – Community Catalyst Grant Program (Total: 100 Points)

Scoring Category (4 + Bonus)	Description	Points Available
1. Alignment with Measure Q Vision Plan	Project clearly advances one or more priority thematic area(s) identified in the Vision Plan (water resources; wildfire risk reduction & forest health; parks, access &	0–40

	equity) and aligns with priority project types and/or geographies. Highest scores will be assigned to multi-benefit projects and projects identified through regional planning and prioritization efforts.	
2. Community Benefit	Demonstrates direct community recreation, public access, ecological, watershed or wildfire-resilience benefits. Highest scores will be assigned to projects that have identified specific, measurable target outcomes.	0-30
3. Feasibility	Provides a realistic scope, achievable timeline, clear deliverables, and evidence of adequate staffing or partnerships.	0–20
4. Innovation or Capacity	Encourages new ideas, pilot approaches, or builds capacity for future large-scale implementation work using Measure Q Tier 2 grant funds or outside grant funding sources.	0-10
Bonus Points (Optional)	Strong partnerships, volunteer /outside funds leverage, or particularly efficient use of funds.	0–5

Tier 2 – Community Impact Grant Program (Total: 100 Points)

Scoring Category (7 + Bonus)	**Description**	**Points Available**
1. Alignment with Measure Q Vision Plan	Project clearly advances one or more priority thematic area(s) identified in the Vision Plan (water resources; wildfire risk reduction & forest health; parks, access & equity) and aligns with priority project types and/or geographies. Highest scores will be assigned to multi-benefit projects and projects identified through regional planning and prioritization efforts.	0–25
2. Community Benefit	Demonstrates direct community recreation and public access, ecological, watershed or wildfire-resilience benefits. Highest scores will be assigned to projects that have identified specific, measurable target outcomes.	0-20

Scoring Category (7 + Bonus)	Description	Points Available
3. Wildlife & Environmental Benefit	Improvements to water, habitat, or climate resilience are incorporated into project design beyond minimum compensatory mitigation measures as required by permitting agencies.	0–20
4. Project Feasibility & Readiness	Demonstrates technical soundness, clear methodology, permitting readiness (if applicable), qualified personnel, and achievable milestones.	0–15
5. Budget, Cost-Effectiveness & Leveraging	Budget is well-constructed, logical, and costs are justified relative to impact; leveraged funds strengthen competitiveness.	0–10
6. Long-term Maintenance & Monitoring	Plan for sustained benefits independent of Measure Q funding; identifies plans for maintenance and monitoring of benefits post-grant term	0-5
7. Partnerships & Collaboration	Strength of partnerships, leveraging, volunteer engagement, multi-agency scope.	0–5
Bonus Points (Optional)	Exceptional readiness, regional significance, strong partnerships, high leverage ratio, or long-term stewardship commitments.	0–5

7. Evaluation and Award Process

The Measure Q Grant Program is jointly administered by OR3 and the Department of Parks, Open Space & Cultural Services. The following process outlines the steps from Measure Q grant application to grant awards for all Tiers of grants. The geographic set aside for the San Vicente Redwoods apportionment will not be subject to this competitive evaluation process, provided applications received are deemed eligible project types and do not exceed $600,000 in total requested funding.

1. Applications undergo preliminary review by County staff for eligibility and completeness; once deemed complete all applications will be considered final.

- Applicants may be asked for additional information to ensure application completeness. The intent of this step is not to eliminate applications based on general missing information.

2. Grant application scoring by external evaluators (s) and internal County staff
   - Based on available evaluation resources, the County will aim to assign no less than 3 scores per application.
   - Both internal and external evaluators will score applications independently based on the published scoring criteria.
   - Evaluators will not discuss scores with one another during the active scoring phase to minimize bias.
   - After all applications are scored, high variance score pairs will be identified among the resulting applicant pool and evaluators will have the opportunity to discuss and revise scores to ensure alignment with the scoring rubric.
3. Preliminary Grant Award Recommendations presented to the COAB
   - All Grant application materials, scores, and evaluator comments will be provided to COAB and published on the Measure Q website at this time.
   - Based on the distribution of scores[1], a subset of projects will be considered at this time to form the basis of the final recommendation
   - The County will aim to award approximately 10% of available grant funding to Tier 1 projects. The final amount will depend on the number and scores of Tier 1 applications received.
4. Final Grant Award Recommendations presented to and approved by COAB.
   - OR3 and Parks staff will integrate COAB feedback into the final recommendation.
   - Prior to making a final recommendation to the COAB, staff will consult with all top-scoring applicants to determine impacts of partial award funding on project delivery.
5. Final Grant Award Recommendations presented to and approved by County Board of Supervisors.

[1] As reference, for the FY2025-26 grant cycle only the top 10 projects in each Tier were considered for final award recommendations (Tier 1 n = 29, Tier 2 n = 21 excluding SVR set-aside) and represented applications scoring over 90 out of 105 points possible. The exact cutoff threshold and number of awards considered will depend on the number of applications received and overall distribution of scores using the FY2026-27 scoring rubric.

8. Funding Policies

Grant Fund Advancement

Advance funding requests are permitted for eligible nonprofits consistent with Government Code, Section 11019. Tier 1 grantees may request an advance of up to 25% of the award to support project initiation, while Tier 2 grantees may request an advance of up to 15% on a case-by-case basis. Recipients of advance payments in either Tier program are subject to other additional requirements per Section 300 (E) of the County's Board approved Policy and Procedure Manual (linked here).

Reimbursement

Reimbursement requests may be submitted by grantees on a quarterly basis. Monthly cadence may be available on a case-by-case basis to support project implementation needs. Typical reimbursement will be a net 30 days upon receipt of request and acceptance of all required documentation. The County may withhold 10% of each payment as retention. Grantees may submit the final invoice and retention request after the grant term ends, once closeout is complete and all project expenditures are verified.

Indirect Costs

Indirect costs are organizational expenses not directly associated with grant project or program delivery. Nonprofit organizations and tribal entities may include up to 15% of the total funding request as indirect costs. Public agencies may request indirect costs with justification, not to exceed 10% of the total funding request. Staff overhead costs associated with project or program delivery are not included in this percentage.

All indirect cost claims may be subject to review and audit to ensure compliance with grant requirements.

Example: A nonprofit with $85,000 in direct costs may request up to $15,000 in indirect costs, for a total award of $100,000.

A formula to support applicants in calculating the maximum indirect cost from their direct cost is as follows:

Max Indirect Cost = Direct Cost x (Indirect Rate ÷ (1 – Indirect Rate))

Living Wage Requirement

Grant agreements may be subject to County Code Chapter 2.122, which requires employers to pay a living wage to covered employees. Grantees should review the County Living Wage Ordinance to determine whether it applies to their organization and incorporate into their budget planning.

Prevailing Wage Requirement

Projects funded in whole or in part with Measure Q grant funds may be subject to California prevailing wage laws, depending on the nature of the work performed. Under California Labor Code sections 1720 and 1771, prevailing wage requirements generally apply to "public works" projects—generally defined as construction, alteration, demolition, installation, repair, or certain maintenance work paid for with public funds. This may apply even if the work occurs on private property or is performed by a nonprofit organization.

Examples of projects that may trigger prevailing wage requirements include, but are not limited to:

- Construction or installation of infrastructure
- Repair or replacement of drainage systems, culverts, or roads
- Slope stabilization or retaining walls
- Grading or earthwork tied to improvements
- Installation of erosion control systems
- Fuel reduction contracts over $500,000 on public land
- Tree removal or forestry work performed as part of a construction, alteration, or maintenance project

These examples are illustrative **only** and are not a complete list. Applicability depends on the specific scope of work. Each grantee is responsible for determining whether prevailing wage laws apply to their project and for ensuring compliance with all applicable requirements.

Match

Although no match is required, all applicants are encouraged to document financial or leveraged fund contributions such as outside grant funding, volunteer hours, donated materials and services, or partner support to strengthen competitiveness.

Allowable and Restricted Costs

Costs must be reasonable, necessary, and directly tied to the approved project scope. Eligible projects may include pre-project assistance and feasibility, planning, acquisition, construction, development, improvement, restoration, rehabilitation, maintenance, stewardship, or any combination thereof (see County Code 4.65.010(K)).

Allowable cost categories are defined as follows:

- **Personnel (Direct):** Salaries and fringe benefits for the grantee's own staff, for time spent on the approved scope of work. This includes staff time on planning, CEQA and permit preparation, outreach, construction, and maintenance tasks in the scope. Staff time must be tracked by timesheet or a similar record. Grant funds may not supplant other permanent or grant-funded staff time.
- **Contractual:** Consultants and contractors hired to carry out the approved scope of work. Examples include design, engineering, technical studies, CEQA documents, permit preparation, construction, and field crews. All must be hired under the grantee's procurement policy.
- **Supplies and Materials:** Items used up during the project, or items costing less than $10,000 each. Examples include construction and restoration materials, plants, seed, erosion control materials, safety gear, small tools, and outreach materials.
- **Equipment:** Items that last more than one year and cost $10,000 or more each, whether bought or rented. Equipment must directly support the eligible project in perpetuity. Equipment accountability requirements may apply, depending on the grant amount and equipment cost.

- **Other Direct:** Project costs that don't fit another category. Examples include permit and filing fees, travel to project sites, and meeting space or translation for project outreach.
- **Indirect Costs:** Shared organizational costs that support the project but can't be tied to it directly, such as rent, utilities, accounting, and IT. Nonprofit organizations and tribal entities may include up to 15% of the award as indirect costs. Public agencies may request indirect costs with justification, not to exceed 10% of the total award.

Restricted costs include unapproved general administrative overhead, political or lobbying activities, fines or penalties, and any expenditure not aligned with the approved scope of work or that could be considered supplantation of funding the applicant already has secured to carry out the specified project or would otherwise spend (see 4.65.050(F)). All costs must comply with local, State, and Federal requirements and follow sound financial management practices.

9. Grant Term & Reporting Requirements

Initial grant terms are 12 months, with the option to extend up to an additional 24 months when justified by project scope, timing, or seasonal constraints. Larger or more complex projects may receive additional time with County approval.

All grantees must submit a closeout report within 60 days of project end. Grants longer than 12 months also require an annual progress report. Tier 2 grantees must also submit progress reports at least every 6 months and include a brief status update with each reimbursement request.

The County may withhold up to 10 percent of the award until all reporting requirements are met. Closeout reports must include an impact narrative describing benefits such as populations served, acres treated, environmental improvements, equity outcomes, and any upstream or downstream benefits.

10. Audit, Records, and Compliance

Grantees must maintain financial and project records for at least three years after final payment. The County, Citizens Oversight Advisory Board, or authorized auditors

may review or reproduce project records at any reasonable time. Grantees must comply with all applicable laws, including prevailing wage requirements when triggered. The County reserves the right to withhold or recover funds for non-performance, misuse, or non-compliance with the grant agreement.

11. CEQA Compliance

Grantees must comply with all applicable requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act, Public Resources Code §21000 et seq. (CEQA) prior to initiating any project activities subject to CEQA review. Each grantee is responsible for determining CEQA applicability and ensuring compliance. The County is not the CEQA lead agency by association in awarding Measure Q funds to projects.

12. Funding Recognition Requirements

All public-facing materials, signage, and communications must acknowledge Measure Q support using the required language: “Funded by the County of Santa Cruz Measure Q – Safe Drinking Water, Clean Beaches, Wildfire Risk Reduction and Wildlife Protection Act” and use the Measure Q logo in the signage.