

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 14, 2019

**USAL-SHADY DELL CREEK CALIFORNIA COASTAL TRAIL
EXTENSION PLANNING**

Project No. 10-030-04

Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$93,000 to Save the Redwoods League to prepare plans, designs and permit applications for a 4.45-mile extension of the California Coastal Trail on the Usal-Shady Dell Creek property in northern Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Adjacent to and south of Usal Beach, Northern Mendocino County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photographs](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed ninety-three thousand dollars (\$93,000) to Save the Redwoods League (SRL) to conduct planning and prepare designs and permit applications for an approximately 4.45-mile extension of the California Coastal Trail on the Usal-Shady Dell Creek property in northern Mendocino County. Prior to disbursement of any funds for the project, SRL shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, schedule, and budget and the names and qualifications of any contractors.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, SRL shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development’ and the requirements of all applicable federal and state laws governing barrier-free access for persons with disabilities into the planning for the Usal-Shady Dell Coastal Trail extension.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. SRL is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy disperse up to \$93,000 to Save the Redwoods League (SRL) to prepare plans, designs and permit applications for a 4.45-mile extension of the California Coastal Trail on the Usal-Shady Dell Creek property in northern Mendocino County. (See Exhibit 1: Project Location)

The Usal-Shady Dell property is located at the southern end of the world-famous Lost Coast Trail that extends 53 miles north into Humboldt County; this unique hiking trail is a popular summer backpacking route along one of the most rugged and pristine sections of the Northern California coast. The Usal-Shady Dell property is situated adjacent to the county-maintained Usal Road and the southern beginning to the Lost Coast Trail and serves as one of the few areas easily accessible by vehicle in this otherwise roadless section of coastal California.

The Conservancy helped SRL acquire the Usal-Shady Dell Creek property in 2011. With additional Conservancy funding, SRL subsequently planned for and completed construction in 2016 of the 2.3-mile Peter Douglas Coastal Trail on the property - a now very popular trail that winds through old growth redwood trees shaped like candelabras, crosses Shady Dell Creek and provides views of the Pacific Ocean. The proposed project will plan for a 3.95-mile Ridge Trail connection to the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail that will create a spectacular 6.25-mile loop through the forest with glimpses of the ocean and the coastal mountain range breaking through the trees. In addition, the project will plan for a ½ mile Shady Dell Creek Trail along the creek that will offer hikers access to large fire-scarred redwoods and a less strenuous climb to the Candelabra grove on the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail. (See Exhibit 1: Site Map)

The proposed planning project will include completion of all necessary biological and archeological surveys, permit applications and proposals for trail design and layout. Evaluation of the trail designs and layout under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) will be carried by the County, as the lead agency; the environmental analysis of the trails for CEQA purposes is not part of the proposed project. The trails will be designed and sited to avoid (or mitigate to insignificance) impacts to sensitive resources.

Site Description: The Shady Dell Creek property is adjacent to the 7,800-acre Sinkyone Wilderness State Park to the north and the 49,500-acre Redwood Forest Foundation property to

the east, which is conserved by a working forest easement. Also, to the north is the Sinkyone Intertribal Wilderness Council land, which connects to the 60,000-acre King Range National Conservation Area, managed by the Bureau of Land Management. To the south are lands managed by Soper-Wheeler, a private timber company.

The 957-acre property contains a variety of highly valuable habitats, including one mile of coastline with sandy beach and steep coastal bluffs, as well as riparian and forested habitat types. (See Exhibit 2: Photographs) The coastal bluff scrub provides habitat for as many as five sensitive plant species, including Mendocino Coast Indian Paintbrush. Records from the California Natural Diversity Database indicate several occurrences of an old forest lichen named “Methuselah’s beard lichen” (*Usnea Longissima*) on the parcel, indicating a complex forest structure. The property also offers habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl. Early to mid-successional redwood and Douglas fir mixed forest surrounds Shady Dell Creek, a tributary of Usal Creek, which supports habitat for Chinook salmon, coho salmon and steelhead trout.

Grantee Qualifications: SRL’s history of conservation work in the area dates to 1922 with acquisitions on the eastern edge of the Usal Forest Conservation Project. The Conservancy has worked with SRL on numerous north coast acquisition projects over the last decade, including the 25,000-acre Mill Creek acquisition in Del Norte County, and smaller acquisitions at Humboldt Lagoons State Park and Montgomery Woods State Park in the upper Big River watershed. More recently, SRL stepped in to provide interim funding for the Jenner Headlands acquisition and the Stewarts Point Ranch acquisition in Sonoma County when the State funding was frozen in 2009. SRL has proven its capabilities as a strong participant in conserving the coast. SRL is a 501(c)(3) organization established to preserve and save portions of the redwood forests for scenic, recreational and wildlife preservation purposes.

SRL will work closely with the Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to implement the project. MLT has a long history of successfully completing public access and land conservation projects throughout Mendocino County. It has opened more than a dozen OTD easements on the Mendocino coast. Most recently, MLT constructed a new coastal trail at Pelican Bluffs near Point Arena and opened a new coastal accessway at Newport north of Fort Bragg. In collaboration with SRL, MLT completed the planning, permitting and construction of the initial 2.3 miles of the Usal-Shady Dell Coastal Trail, subsequently named the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail.

Project History: SRL was awarded \$3,000,000 by the Conservancy in January 2011 to assist with the purchase of the Shady Dell Creek property. The acquisition, completed in October 2011 with \$2,500,000 in matching funds, was part of the 50,000-acre Usal Forest Conservation Project, a cooperative project of the Redwood Forest Foundation Inc (RFFI), the Conservation Fund, SRL, the Coastal Conservancy, and the Wildlife Conservation Board. The majority of RFFI’s property was conserved through a working forest conservation easement. The portion of the property deemed most suitable for public acquisition and access was the Shady Dell Creek property, and thus it was acquired in fee by SRL.

One of the primary purposes of the acquisition was the development of new California Coastal Trail. In October 2012, the Conservancy awarded SRL \$78,750 to develop an access plan that included archaeology, botanical, wetland and wildlife surveys, engineering designs for the trail

and associated improvements and permit applications. SRL completed the access plan and subsequently constructed 2.3 miles of new trail with a Conservancy grant of \$350,000 matched by \$100,000 of SRL funds. This trail was completed in 2016 and named the “Peter Douglas Coastal Trail” in honor of the late executive director of the California Coastal Commission. SRL is now seeking funding to plan for extending the trail system by approximately 4.45 miles.

The Conservancy has a long history of developing and implementing projects in the vicinity. In addition to the Usal-Shady Dell Creek acquisition, public access planning and trail construction, the Conservancy provided funding for the Sinkyone State Park acquisitions in the late 1980s and sold land to the Intertribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council (ITSWC) for creation of their wilderness park in the 1990s. Subsequently, the Conservancy awarded a grant to ITWSC to plan for and construct two trails on that property connecting to the Sinkyone State Park and has also worked with the ITSWC on implementation of anadromous fish habitat improvement projects.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$93,000
Save the Redwoods League	<u>\$16,300</u>
Project Total	\$109,300

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, “Proposition 84,” Public Resources Code section 75001 *et seq.* Subsection 75060(b) of the Public Resources Code authorizes the use of these funds for projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project serves to promote access to coastal resources by completing planning, design and permit applications for a new segment of CCT, and is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 as explained below. Therefore, it is appropriate to use Proposition 84 funds for the proposed project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 *et seq.*).

Section 31400 states that it is the intent of the Legislature that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline.

Pursuant to section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop lands for public access to and along the coast. SRL is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization. The proposed project will lead to the development of new coastal trail.

Pursuant to section 31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by a nonprofit organization. Consistent with this section, the

amount of funding provided by the Conservancy has been determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, as described below.

Pursuant to section 31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. The Conservancy's funding will enable SRL to proceed with the design and permitting of public access on the Shady Dell property.

Pursuant to section 31408, the Conservancy shall coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail. The proposed project will lead to the development of 4 miles of new coastal trail.

In addition, Public Resources Code section 31111 allows the Conservancy to undertake plans and feasibility studies to carry out the purposes of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:

The project involves design for a project rather than construction of an accessway. To the extent appropriate, SRL shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' into the design for this accessway.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design an approximately 4.45-mile segment of new coastal trail within land held by SRL.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** By developing a plan to expand by 4.45 miles the existing Usal-Shady Dell Coastal Trail segment into a larger and more complex system of trails with greater public access along the rugged Mendocino Coast, the proposed project will promote and implement the following state plans and policies:

- *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (Coastal Conservancy 2003), Objective #1, which calls for providing a continuous trail as close to the ocean as possible; Objective #4, which seeks to assure that the location and design of the California Coastal Trail is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act and Local Coastal Programs; and Objective #5, to design the California Coastal Trail to provide a valuable experience for the user by protecting the natural environment and cultural resources while providing public access to beaches, scenic vistas, wildlife viewing areas and other points of interest.
 - *Coastal Act (1976)*, Public Resources Code Sections 30210 and 30214 on public access and recreation that call for “maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.”
 - *California Coastal Sediment Management Master Plan*, Goals 2 and 3 are to “sustain recreation and tourism,” and “enhance public safety and access.” Careful planning during the first phase of the proposed project will put in place precautions to prevent erosion damage and preserve soil structure on steep slopes, improving public use of the new trails.
4. **Support of the public:** The project has wide support as evidenced in Exhibit 3: Project Letters.
 5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Mendocino County.
 6. **Need:** It is unlikely the project will proceed without Conservancy funding because few funding sources are available for trail planning. The trail extension will provide new opportunities for hikers on the Lost Coast and visitors to Usal Beach to explore the ridgeline and Usal Creek area on designated trails, avoiding the damage to the sensitive natural resources that occur with volunteer trails.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Recreationally, the Lost Coast is famous as a destination for hikers, backpackers and campers. The King Range National Conservation Area recently started requiring permits in order to limit visitor use in backcountry areas. According to the BLM, visitor use has increased over 150% since 2006. The southern Lost Coast trail does not require any permits and will likely experience increased visitation by those who could not get a permit for the King Range. By providing an expanded trail system at Shady Dell, SRL will be able to accommodate increased trail use and disperse hikers for a more wilderness experience.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Vulnerability to sea level rise is minimal on the Shady Dell property. The coastal portion of the property contains steep coastal bluffs that provide stunning views, but no access to the shoreline. The northern access point, where the shoreline is accessible from the Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, could become less accessible with anticipated sea level rise over the next 50-100 years. However, any future trail construction would occur mainly at higher elevations, and thus access to the property

would be maintained. The remainder of the property would not be impacted by anticipated sea level rise, and in fact, could provide alternative locations for public access improvements currently located in potentially vulnerable areas on the existing state parks.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Trail design will balance the need for improved public access facilities with protection of sensitive habitats and rare species.
10. **Readiness:** SRL has developed a scope of work, budget and timeline and garnered broad community support for the project. Additionally, SRL completed the previous planning and construction of the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail in a timely manner.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
12. **Cooperation:** SRL and MLT have been working in collaboration with California State Parks, Sinkyone Intertribal Council, Mendocino Area Parks Association, and Humboldt Redwoods Interpretive Association as part of the Usal Committee. Together the committee is working on a joint effort to improve Usal Beach by providing outreach to visitors and educational programs for children, as well as working on restoration projects to remove invasive plants. Many of the children involved in the educational programs come from communities that for generations have been coming to Usal. The extension of the Shady Dell trail system will benefit these communities and support the effort of the Usal Committee to improve the experience of visitors to the Usal area.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Mendocino County Local Coastal Plan. Specifically, Policy 4.1-2 states “a hiking trail should be developed....It should extend from the Humboldt County line southward beyond the southern limits of the (Sinkyone Wilderness) State Park and along the Usal Road to State Highway 1.”

Policy 4.1-3 states “The Board of Supervisors or appropriate entity should continue to negotiate for a trail from Humboldt County line southward to connect with other trails within the Coastal Zone.”

Policy 4.1-10 states “coastal trails shall be established for hiking and equestrian use...along the Briceland Road and Usal Creek, and aligned with other trail segments to the south.”

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project involves only feasibility and planning studies and it may include basic data collection, resource evaluation, and research, that will not impact any environmental resources, for possible future action which has not yet been approved, authorized, adopted, or funded by the Conservancy or another agency. Therefore, the proposed project is thus statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations

title 14, section 15262 and categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations, title 14, section 15306. Planning carried out as part of this project will, however, consider environmental factors as required by section 15262. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of this project.