

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 15, 2024

**REDWOOD NATIONAL AND STATE PARK VISITOR CENTER AND RESTORATION PROJECT –
COASTAL TRAIL CONSTRUCTION**

Project No. 14-055-06

Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to the Yurok Tribe to construct 0.68 miles of the California Coastal Trail and replace culverts on Libby Creek, a tributary to Prairie Creek, as part of the Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project, at the former 125-acre Orick Mill A site in Humboldt County.

LOCATION: 1.5 miles north of Orick, Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Components](#)

Exhibit 3: [Proposed Project and Trail Gateway Layout](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to the Yurok Tribe (“the grantee”) to construct 0.68 miles of the California Coastal Trail and replace culverts on Libby Creek, a tributary to Prairie Creek, as part of the Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project, at the former 125-acre Orick Mill A site in Humboldt County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

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3. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
4. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

To the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s “Coastal Access Project Standards”.

In carrying out the project, the grantee shall comply with all applicable mitigation and monitoring measures identified in the Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program adopted by the Conservancy on September 3, 2020 and comply with all measures and conditions that are required by any permit or approval.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation 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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,500,000 grant to the Yurok Tribe to construct 0.68 miles of the California Coastal Trail and replace culverts on Libby Creek, a tributary to Prairie Creek, as part of the Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project (RNSPVCR Project), at the former 125-acre Orick Mill A site in Humboldt County. The site is located at the intersection of Highway 101 and Bald Hills Road and is nearly surrounded by Redwood National and State Park (RNSP) which comprises Redwood National Park (RNP) and Prairie Creek State Park (PCSP) (Exhibit 1).

The mill operated from 1960-2009 and was demolished in 2010 leaving behind a site degraded by past land management and operations, as described in Site Description below. Save the Redwoods League (the League) purchased the property in 2013 with the vision to restore habitat and create a new southern entrance to RNSP, a “Gateway to the Redwoods”, to facilitate public access, habitat restoration, education, and cultural enrichment for the Yurok tribal members through stewardship of their ancestral lands. The near term goal is for the League to transfer the property to RNP by early 2026 for long term management and operation

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in the RNSP system. The Conservancy has been engaged with the League and others to develop and implement the RNSPVCR Project since its inception, in 2015.

The RNSPVCR Project is the result of more than six years of planning, and three years of ongoing construction, to restore the former mill site into a visitor center with a system of public trails, and to restore critical salmonid habitat on Prairie Creek. It includes infrastructure, recreation enhancements, and habitat restoration elements to increase recreation and public education opportunities, provide regional trail connections, restore hydrological connections and floodplain habitat, and improve habitat for native plants, fish, and wildlife. Multiple community meetings were held during planning to receive input from the community on project objectives. Updates on project progress continue to be provided to the Orick Chamber of Commerce and the Orick Community Services District as restoration construction continues. The Yurok Tribe is leading the restoration construction through its Fisheries Department and Construction Company, and its Cultural Department is working closely with the League to lead the development of cultural interpretive materials for the site.

The RNSPVCR Project components are shown in Exhibit 2. This authorization would fund the California Coastal Trail (CCT) and the Libby Creek components. In this staff report, these activities are referred to as “the project” or “the proposed project”, while the larger Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project is referred to as the “RNSPVCR Project”. The League and Conservancy staff are pursuing other funding to carry out the Trail Gateway component of the RNSPVCR Project which would complete the public access improvements at the site. That is referred to in this staff report as “Trail Gateway” and is included to provide context of its relationship with the proposed project and to the Conservancy’s future involvement as potential recipient of outside grant funds, as discussed in the Project Financing section, below. See Exhibit 3 for layout of CCT and the Trail Gateway.

There is no direct trail connection between the town of Orick, which is a severely disadvantaged community, and PCSP to the north and RNP located inland and up Bald Hill Road to the east. This creates a barrier for many local residents and regional visitors, who may not have vehicular transportation, to access nature and the recreational amenities in the parks. 17.6% of Orick households do not own a car, according to the most recent American Community Survey/US Census data. Highway 101 is the only north-south public right-of-way between the town of Orick and PCSP through the Prairie Creek Corridor area of the highway. It serves as a segment of the California Department of Transportation’s designated Pacific Coast Bike Route and as a proxy segment of the CCT. However, because this section of the highway is narrow and winding with inadequate safety margins, it is not ideal for either the Pacific Coast Bike Route or the CCT, and is therefore designated a “gap” in the CCT. The proposed CCT segment was identified as a future preferred route and a priority project for the CCT in the “Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy”, prepared by Redwood Community Action Agency in 2011. Conceptual designs for the CCT through the site were developed with the initial planning grant to the League in 2015.

Conservancy funds for the proposed project will support conversion of old haul roads, known as Upper Road and Lower Road, into the 0.68 mile segment of CCT through the property including a loop through redwoods and Sitka spruce, and the replacement of undersized and dilapidated

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culverts on Libby Creek, a tributary to Prairie Creek that drains the adjacent steep hillside on RNP. Culvert replacement is critical to the long term durability of the trails because it will provide increased capacity for Libby Creek flows, especially during heavy rain events, and eliminate flooding and erosion of the new trails. The new coastal trail segment will also provide non-motorized and pedestrian access to PCSP via Berry Glenn at the north end of the property, access to the new Centennial Trail on RNP to the popular Lady Bird Johnson Grove of old growth redwood on RNP, and critically-needed off-highway (Highway 101) safe passage for through hikers and cyclists, including residents of the severely disadvantaged community of Orick and the region that must travel on foot or bicycles.

The site provides the first location on the southern boundary of RNSP, along Highway 101 and in the heart of Yurok ancestral lands, where visitors can directly access old-growth redwoods and the greater RNSP trail network. Nearby trailheads are overcrowded during peak season, making the site imperative for added capacity. There is also need and demand for local access and programming by the Yurok Tribe and Orick community. The RNSPVCR Project will provide abundant opportunities to share the culture and knowledge of the Yurok People with visitors, while the planned Yurok Village Site will provide an important venue for Tribal cultural programs and the engagement of Tribal youth. The proposed project when coupled with the Trail Gateway will transform the former mill site into a new southern gateway to RNSP that includes ADA-accessible trails, wildlife and nature viewing opportunities, and other amenities to facilitate outdoor recreation, education, and cultural enrichment for the Yurok Tribe, local communities, and the one million visitors to the area each year.

The League has separately funded the planning for the Trail Gateway and has partnered with and supported the Conservancy to raise funds for implementation. In June 2022, the Conservancy authorized the disbursement of Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) funds awarded to the Conservancy for Gateway improvements to the League to implement initial access improvements. As described in the Project Financing section, below, Conservancy staff have recently submitted an application to WCB for funds to complete construction of visitor infrastructure and amenities, including specifically the pedestrian plaza, bathroom facilities, benches and accessories, large vehicle parking area, 0.71 miles of trails including a 0.5 mile wetland trail overlooking the restored floodplain, and interpretive exhibits. The funding requested from WCB includes direct support for Yurok Tribal staff to design and develop the onsite interpretive content and programming. If awarded, the WCB funds will be granted by the Conservancy to the League to construct the Gateway and other infrastructure elements listed above.

The Trails Gateway and the proposed project will deliver much-needed recreational capacity, 1.39 miles of trail including a new accessible .68-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail, and access to and connection with the expansive RNSP trail network, and provide onsite Yurok cultural programs.

Site Description:

The 125-acre mill site is situated on the east side of Highway 101 between Bald Hills Road and Berry Glen at the confluence of Redwood Creek and Prairie Creek. Prairie Creek flows through the property, which is nearly entirely bounded by RNSP. Located at the southern entrance into

RNSP, this property is the gateway to the world’s tallest trees and a national treasure that draws visitors from around the world. RNSP is designated a World Heritage Site and part of the California Coast Range Biosphere Reserve, designations that reflect worldwide recognition of the park’s natural resources as irreplaceable. The flyway for the largest intact population of the federally threatened marbled murrelet occurs over the property and Roosevelt Elk forage on site. Otters, beaver, black bears, great blue herons, deer, and coyotes are known to frequent the site, and coho, Chinook salmon, steelhead trout and coastal cutthroat utilize Prairie Creek.

When the League purchased the property in 2013, it included several legacy artifacts from its time as a lumber mill including concrete foundations of the mill building and housing, a 21-acre asphalt log pad and two haul roads, known as Upper Road, and Lower Road. Upper Road connects with Berry Glenn at the north end of the property, and Lower Road connects with Upper Road to create a loop road that also connects back to the old asphalt pad.

Before it was a lumber mill, the property was operated for dairy and cattle grazing and was graded to accommodate grazing, pushing Prairie Creek up against Highway 101 in several locations thus altering the sinuosity of the creek, and creating long straight sections of creek with little or no complexity for fish rearing habitat. Following three years of habitat restoration activities, the northern half of the property is much improved and includes a new creek meander, backwater habitat, wetland and riparian habitat planted with natives, and large wood habitat structures. Of the original 21 acres of asphalt pad, eight acres remain to be removed to complete setting the stage for the Trail Gateway public access amenities. Upper Road and Lower Road remain unimproved and are the setting for the CCT and the Loop Trail.

The mill area has been investigated for toxics and certified as clean by the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Yurok Tribe (a federally recognized tribe) is the grantee for all the habitat restoration construction work to date at the mill site. They were integrally involved in the restoration planning and have completed three construction seasons, since 2021, including the construction of a 2-acre backwater pond, installed the new 800-foot creek meander, restored 1,000 feet of existing channel, installed large wood instream habitat structures, and installed native plants to all restored floodplains. The Yurok Tribe also is managing a Conservancy grant for habitat restoration on Tribal lands in tributaries to the Klamath River. Their experience at and familiarity with the site make them highly qualified to construct the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.

See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan” section below.

2. Project is a good investment of state resources.

The proposed project is a good investment of state resources because 1) it contributes to the State’s objective to complete the Coastal Trail system and address trail gaps along the California coast; (2) it will build upon previous state investments; and (3) it supports the goal to complete a trail segment identified in the Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy (2011).

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.

The Yurok Tribe has been a core partner since project inception, with representatives participating in the planning and design for all project elements. The League has presented the project objectives to the Yurok Tribal Council and Culture Committee numerous times, seeking input and inviting collaboration; this resulted in the Yurok taking a key role in the restoration and visitor center planning, the development of interpretive designs and a Yurok Village Site component of the project, and ultimately in participating in project implementation as the restoration construction team.

The League has worked extensively with Yurok Tribe Cultural staff who has led the development of interpretive materials to be installed during CCT and Trail Gateway construction.

4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

Construction of the Coastal Trail and Loop Trail requires replacement of the Libby Creek culverts that lie beneath Upper Road and Lower Roads. The new arch culverts are designed to accommodate high winter runoff from hillside flows to and along Libby Creek, thereby protecting the new trail segment against erosional damage. Further, once the entire RNSPVCR Project is complete and the property is transferred to the National Park Service, the project site will be added to RNSP and managed by the National Park Service, in partnership with State Parks. The project site will be included in the operations budget for Redwood National Park with long-term stewardship goals to preserve the forest and riparian habitat values of the project site while facilitating public access for passive recreational use. There is also an opportunity to continue to partner with local organizations in the ongoing monitoring and stewardship of the site, including the Yurok Tribe youth crews, Redwood Community Action Agency, and others.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will provide direct economic benefits to the town of Orick and the Yurok Tribe, both designated as Severely Disadvantaged Communities. These benefits will come during construction of the project and installation of interpretive materials, in the form of employment and vendor opportunities. Yurok Tribe will have access to the site for tribal programming and interpretation. Additional economic benefits will result from increased visitor numbers as recreational and educational opportunities are added in the area.

Also, the CCT will provide a safe off-highway route for pedestrians and bicyclists to travel between Orick and the bicycle and pedestrian routes in RNSP.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

There has been extensive community engagement with key stakeholders including Orick residents, the Yurok Tribe, and local, state, and federal agencies. During the conceptual planning phase, seven stakeholder meetings were held, and input was incorporated into project designs. The purpose of these stakeholder meetings was to introduce the project and seek meaningful input to develop a project scope that would restore salmonid and terrestrial wildlife habitat, develop a trails system for public access to the property and the larger RNSP network, and improve safe active transportation for the local community by developing an off-highway bike path. Concurrently, the League held public meetings specifically with the Orick community, inviting them to provide input on what it would take to reshape the former mill site into a world class visitor center that would maximize local community benefits. These meetings enabled all stakeholders to shape the RNSPVCR Project for improved habitat values and future public uses to benefit the community by bolstering health and providing local jobs and business opportunities related to expanded tourism. In November 2022, the League hosted an open house for the public to visit the site. Approximately 120 members of the public attended.

The RNSPVCR Project, which includes the proposed project and the Trail Gateway, has garnered wide community support, including from Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, Orick Chamber of Commerce, Orick Community Services District, Redwood National Park, Senator Mike McGuire, Assemblymember Jim Wood, and Congressman Jared Huffman.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,500,000
Save the Redwoods League	\$650,000
Nat'l Parks Foundation/Arbor Day Foundation/UPS Foundation	\$100,000
Anticipated Additional Future Gateway Funding (via Outside State or Federal Grants)	\$3,483,000
Project Total	\$5,733,000

Conservancy funding for the proposed project is expected to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation to the Conservancy from the General Fund for the purpose of urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies (Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of SB 155 (Chapter 258, Statutes of 2021), which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including projects for non-motorized trails of statewide significance.

The proposed project is consistent with the funding purposes as it will develop a segment of the Coastal Trail, which is a trail of statewide significance.

Conservancy staff have submitted a proposal to the Wildlife Conservation Board for the approximate \$3,483,000 needed to complete the gateway improvements that will tie into the Coastal Trail funded by the Conservancy.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy has a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. The proposed project will construct a new segment of coastal trail that would provide the public with access to and along coast.

The proposed project is consistent with § 31408(a), directing the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail, and § 31409, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The proposed trail will fill a gap identified in the Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy (2011), and will connect with trails within the RNSP such as the iconic Lady Bird Johnson Grove, located inland of the mill site.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will provide economic benefits to the town of Orick from job and vendor supply opportunities during construction, and from tourists utilizing local services post construction.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will construct of 0.68 miles of new Coastal Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will install picnic areas, restrooms, parking, trails, and interpretive signage to enhance coastal recreational opportunities.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On September 3, 2020, the Conservancy adopted the “Initial Study/Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project” (IS/MND) and authorized funding for the project. The Conservancy filed a Notice of Determination with the State Clearinghouse on September 8, 2020. The project remains substantially unchanged from its description in the IS/MND, and no new environmental

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information or change in circumstances require a re-evaluation of the potential environmental effects of the project (14 Cal Code. Regs. Section 15162(b)). The proposed authorization remains consistent with the CEQA findings adopted by the Conservancy in connection with the September 3, 2020 authorization.