

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 15, 2024

POINT SAINT GEORGE COASTAL TRAIL IMPLEMENTATION

Project No. 05-048-03
Project Manager: Peter Jarausch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to the Smith River Alliance Inc. to implement cultural resource protections and construct 1.25 miles of the California Coastal Trail, new restrooms, interpretive signage, and other improvements to the main trailhead parking area at Point Saint George in Del Norte County.

LOCATION: Point Saint George, Del Norte County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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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 Smith River Alliance (“the grantee”) to implement cultural resource protections, and construct 1.25 miles of the California Coastal Trail, new restrooms, interpretive signage, and other improvements to the main trailhead parking area at Point Saint George in Del Norte County.

Prior to commencing 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.
 3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
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4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Prior to commencing the project, the grantee shall enter into and record an agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code 31116(d) sufficient to protect the public interest in the improvements.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's "Coastal Access Project Standards".

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.
3. The Smith River Alliance is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$1,500,000 to the Smith River Alliance, Inc. (SRA) to implement the Point Saint George Coastal Trail Implementation Project (the project), consisting of protecting exposed cultural resources and constructing approximately 1.25 miles of the California Coastal Trail, new restrooms, interpretive signage, and other improvements to the main trailhead parking area at Point Saint George in Del Norte County. This work will fill a gap in the California Coastal Trail, protect sensitive resources, improve public safety, and provide amenities at a natural area that is an important open space destination for tourists and the local community. The project is essential to protect the resources of the site and to improve public access to the 339-acre Point Saint George property that was purchased in part with Conservancy funds in 2002.

The project will provide multiple benefits. It will fill a gap in the coastal trail, providing a continuous reach of coastal trail from Pebble Beach, located two miles to the south, to the mouth of the Smith River, located approximately 11 miles to the north (Exhibit 1). Approximately 0.4 miles of the new trail will be accessible to people who use wheelchairs or have reduced mobility. The project will reduce impacts from informal trails on sensitive natural resources by closing those trails and designating one formal trail in their place, and will protect sensitive cultural resources by capping sites that are currently being exposed through erosion.

It will reduce unsafe use of the parking area after hours. Currently, the parking area is a large open area that is ungated and is frequently used in the middle of the night for reckless driving (doing donuts and speeding). The project designs include a gate, limiting the use of the site to dawn to dusk hours, and will also demarcate a one-way route of travel and add a speed table and curbs, which will reduce opportunities for reckless driving. The project includes a restroom and picnic area. Additionally, it will also provide interpretive content, allowing visitors to learn about the cultural significance of the site to the Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation, as well as the site's recent history and natural resources.

The project will implement priority management actions identified in the 2004 Point St. George Management Plan (Plan), which was adopted by the County of Del Norte and by the Conservancy. The Plan was prepared collaboratively by the County of Del Norte, Conservancy, California State Parks, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), the Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation, and the Elk Valley Rancheria, with input from local residents. The Plan identified the need to balance public use with the protection of cultural and natural resources, and prioritized designating the coastal trail alignment, providing parking and an accessible trail to an overlook for wheelchair users, protecting cultural sites, and preparing interpretive materials, all of which will be implemented by the project.

The agencies and tribes that worked together to prepare the Plan have continued to collaborate on the trail and parking lot design through the Point Saint George Working Group and are excited to bring the project to construction. SRA stepped in last year to assist the working group with the final elements of design and permitting. The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation has also been working with State Parks on the interpretive elements for the site. Opportunities have been provided for the general public to provide input during the final design stage.

Site Description: Point Saint George is a scenic windswept headland located just northwest of Crescent City in Del Norte County, approximately fifteen miles south of the California-Oregon border. Del Norte is California's northernmost county, with a population of just under 30,000 people, most of whom reside in the Crescent City area. Acquired by the County in 2002 in part with Coastal Conservancy funds, the 339-acre coastal terrace with its steep cliffs, offshore sea stacks, and crashing surf is increasingly appreciated and used by local people and Redwood Coast visitors. Ownership of Point Saint George is split between four landowners, three public and one private. The County of Del Norte owns the largest portion followed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Wildlife Conservation Board. A small private inholding consisting of a primary residence and several small structures exists just west of the principal parking lot at the terminus of Radio Road (Exhibit 1).

The prominence of Point Saint George on the northwest coast was not lost on the indigenous people of the area, the Tolowa tribe. For centuries before the arrival of Europeans, ancestors of the present-day Tolowa made use of the headland. Archaeological surveys and radiocarbon dating of artifacts suggest that the site was used since roughly 310 B.C., placing it among the earliest occupied sites in the region.

The dramatic interaction of the ocean and rocky shore is exceptional at Point Saint George. The headland's steep bluffs drop to rocky pocket beaches and intertidal shelves, some accessible by trail, others enclosed by towering cliffs and sea. The coastal terrace itself features a vast

panorama: to the north, across Pelican Bay and its lonely expanse of sandy beach, lie the coastal mountains of southern Oregon; to the west, six miles offshore on the seemingly open sea, is the Saint George Reef Light Station, a critical beacon for navigation since 1892; to the south are Castle Rock, the biggest coastal island north of the Farallon Islands, the many sea stacks offshore of Crescent City's Pebble Beach, and the forested cliffs of the Redwood Coast; and to the east, the forests and snowy peaks of California's Siskiyou Mountains. Inland and to the east of the bluffs, the land slopes gently to the southeast with the lowest elevations being in the vicinity of the airport. This area contains a large depression that collects water during the rainy season and slowly dries as the seasonal drought proceeds. Among the several unusual plant species found here is the increasingly rare western lily, one of several species that benefit from periodic management to control competitive vegetation that in former times was grazed by wild animals and burned by indigenous people. A 1991 survey found the Oregon silverspot butterfly, the Yontocket ringlet butterfly, the Wolf's evening primrose, the black crowberry, and the Arctic starflower, all rare species. The rocky coast snail and the sand dune phacelia were found in adjacent habitats on Point Saint George. Over 100 different bird species have been sighted at Point Saint George.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SRA was incorporated in 1980, and its mission is to provide for the long-term protection, restoration, and stewardship of natural resources within the Smith River watershed. SRA has successfully managed multiple grants from the Conservancy, including grants for restoration of watershed lands, restoration planning and permitting, fish barrier removal, and conservation land acquisition. SRA is thus well qualified to undertake the work proposed in this authorization.

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.

This project involves a reasonable expenditure of funds for the multiple benefits for the public that it will provide, including improved public access, new coastal trail, reduced impacts on natural and cultural resources, and improved public safety (See Criterion 5 below). The project

budget is based on estimates from several consultants and from similar past projects, and leverages partnerships and staff time between multiple state and local agencies and tribes.

The proposed project is generally consistent with several state plans, and specifically with the following:

Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2021-2025: This State Parks Plan includes the following priorities that will be furthered by the project: 1) Create new park access; 2) Include safety and beautification enhancements to make new or existing parks appear welcoming; and 3) Build recreation features that are designed to support healthy lifestyles in new or existing parks.

Pathways to 30x30: The 2022 plan includes the following priorities that will be furthered by the project: 1) Incorporate programming, education, outreach, and engagement that is accessible and representative of California's cultural diversity; and 2) Increase access points and trails within existing natural areas including coastal areas and urban rivers.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes.

Planning for Point Saint George management has involved collaboration with the Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation and the Elk Valley Rancheria since the property was acquired by the County in 2002. The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation and the Elk Valley Rancheria are represented on the Point Saint George Working Group. The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation received funding through a prior authorization and is in the process of developing interpretive content for the site.

In addition, the project will facilitate the protection of cultural resources at the site which are currently threatened by exposure and disturbance due to erosion. The Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation and the Elk Valley Rancheria helped design the protection for these cultural resources. Tribal monitors will be present during construction activities that involve ground disturbance.

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

The trail, parking area, and associated amenities are expected to be resilient to climate change over at least fifty years. The primary threat to these improvements would be bluff retreat. A bluff retreat technical memo was prepared in 2013 for the study area, which concluded that the bluffs in the project area will not be undercut by rising sea levels due to the resistant nature of bedrock materials in the lower bluff face. In addition, wave energy in the project area is dissipated by offshore sea stacks. Bluff erosion in the study area is expected to occur primarily by top-down erosion due to surface runoff, which can be managed to mitigate any erosion problems.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will provide multiple benefits with significant positive impact for the public:

- Improved public access, including for people who use wheelchairs, and new amenities at a popular location for coastal recreation which receives over 220,000 visitors annually.

Visitor numbers are expected to increase as the North Coast increasingly becomes a refuge from wildfire smoke and extreme heat in inland areas.

- 1.25 miles of new coastal trail, creating a 14-mile continuous reach of coastal trail from Pebble Beach to the south to the mouth of the Smith River to the north.
- Reduced impacts on sensitive natural and cultural resources (see project description above).
- Improved public safety by reducing unsafe use of the parking area after hours.
- Interpretive content will increase public awareness of the Tolowa culture and connection to the land.

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

The project will help implement the 2004 Point Saint George Management Plan. Development of the Plan was overseen by the Point Saint George Management Plan Steering Committee and included public meetings to solicit community input. The steering committee included representatives of the Tolowa Dee-Ni’ Nation, the Elk Valley Rancheria, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Conservancy, CDFW, State Parks, the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, the Del Norte County Historical Society, the North Coast Regional Land Trust, and the agricultural community. Public participation in conjunction with Steering Committee guidance was an important element in the planning process, involving visioning early in the planning process and comments on the draft plan later in the process.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,500,000
Department of Parks and Recreation	\$1,000,000
Funds to be raised	\$2,500,000
Project Total	\$4,500,000

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies”. (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including nonmotorized trails of statewide significance. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will construct a section of the California Coastal Trail and associated facilities that will close a significant gap in the trail, which is a nonmotorized trail of statewide significance.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation has committed to funding the accessible section of trail on the portion of Point Saint George under their ownership. This is through a special fund administered by State Parks for improving accessibility within State Parks and the value of this portion of the project is \$1,000,000.

The remaining funds will be raised through grants which specifically target cultural resource protection, interpretation, and public access. A grant application is pending with the Wildlife Conservation Board.

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 is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Through the proposed project, the Conservancy will help enhance a coastal accessway and thereby further access to and enjoyment of coastal resources along the Del Norte County shoreline.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a non-profit organization for development of accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs. The proposed project will construct a segment of the California Coastal Trail and associated facilities at a popular location that serves visitors from throughout the State. Del Norte County and Point Saint George attract hundreds of thousands of visitors per year.

Section 31400.2 requires the Conservancy to consider a number of factors in determining the amount of funds to provide for the initial development of a public accessway. Consistent with this section, the proposed level of funding was evaluated relative to the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy’s project selection criteria (see Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines).

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to assist nonprofit organizations in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. SRA is assisting public agencies in developing a trail and associated improvements in a heavily visited coastal region.

Section 31408 authorizes the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail in consultation with State Parks, the California Coastal Commission, and Caltrans. The project is consistent with this section, as it involves construction of a section of the Coastal Trail in coordination with State Parks and the Coastal Commission. Caltrans is not directly involved as this section is a pedestrian trail located on State Parks and County property.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project is in and will benefit a Disadvantaged Community.

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the proposed project will construct an accessibility project that reduces barriers to coastal access for people with disabilities by constructing an accessible section of the California Coastal Trail with accessible trailhead parking and amenities.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will construct a section of the California Coastal Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreational Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will construct recreational amenities including restrooms, parking, and picnic areas.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

As stated in the Conservancy resolution of April 6, 2023, the Point St. George Management Area Trail and Parking Lot Project Initial Study-Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the County of Del Norte on May 1, 2013 identifies potentially significant effects from implementation of the project in the areas of air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, and noise. As modified by incorporation of the mitigation measures identified in the IS/MND, project implementation will avoid, reduce, or mitigate all of the possible significant environmental impacts of the project to a level that is less than significant. Based on the record as a whole, there is no substantial evidence that the implementation of the Project, as mitigated, will have a significant effect on the environment.

The proposed authorization remains consistent with the CEQA findings adopted by the Conservancy in connection with the April 6, 2023 authorization. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Determination.