

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 15, 2024

GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL AUGMENTATION

Project No. 22-009-01
Project Manager: Karyn Gear & Mary Small

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to spend up to \$2,963,050 of funds appropriated to the Conservancy for the Great Redwood Trail for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, interim staffing support for the Great Redwood Trail Agency, and other costs and services as may be required for the advancement of the trail in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties.

LOCATION: Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [May 5, 2022 Conservancy Staff Recommendation](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

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

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to two million nine hundred sixty-three thousand fifty dollars (\$2,963,050) for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, interim staffing support for the Great Redwood Trail Agency, and other costs and services as may be required related to the Great Redwood Trail.

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.
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$2,963,050 for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, interim staffing support for the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA), and other costs and services as may be required related to the Great Redwood Trail. The funds for this authorization are derived from an appropriation to the Conservancy in the Budget Act of 2021 for purposes of advancing the Great Redwood Trail. The project is fully described in the May 5, 2022 Staff Recommendation, attached as Exhibit 2.

Conservancy staff have made significant progress on the Great Redwood Trail since the Conservancy's May 2022 authorization to enter into a Joint Powers Agreement with the GRTA and to disburse \$3,500,000 for tasks needed to advance development of the Great Redwood Trail. (Exhibit 2.)

With support from the Conservancy's previous authorization, a consulting team was hired to prepare a master plan for the Great Redwood Trail. That process is well underway, with a draft master plan available for public comment expected in April, 2024. The master plan will provide the general guiding principles for the development of the trail. An important part of the master planning process is an extensive community and tribal outreach program, which is ongoing. The Conservancy has offered government to government consultation with all affected tribes and conducted two consultations. Conservancy staff and consultants have hosted a tribal webinar, attended 11 tribal community events, presented to 7 tribal meetings, and had more than 50 in-depth conversations with tribal members. The broader public outreach program for the Master Plan has included presentations at 23 community events, 4 in person workshops, 2 online workshops, over 70 stakeholder meetings, and 767 surveys completed.

The Conservancy's previous authorization has also supported technical and legal consultants for the federal railbanking process, and railbanking has been completed for the northern 176-mile segment of the rail line (Willits north to its terminus at Samoa on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay). Work has been initiated on the railbanking of the southern segment which stretches from Willits southward to the vicinity of Hopland in Sonoma County. In part with the Executive Officer augmentation, an environmental services firm has been contracted to prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Report in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act for the master plan.

In addition, using some of the 2021 appropriated funds that were set aside for Conservancy staff support, Conservancy staff, including two dedicated project managers, have worked to support the ongoing operations of the GRTA, helping to resolve longstanding property

management issues, and setting up new procedures to improve efficiencies. A new general manager for the GRTA was hired and commenced work in January 2024.

The recommended disbursement will be used to continue progress on the vision of the Great Redwood Trail, with specific tasks that include: (1) continued support of the railbanking process for the southern segment; 2) ongoing support for GRTA staffing, administration and organizational development; 3) completion of the programmatic EIR; 4) continued tribal engagement; and 4) continued engineering, planning and other technical support.

Site Description: The Great Redwood Trail is proposed to stretch the entire length of the former North Coast Railroad Authority (NCRA) right-of-way, from San Francisco Bay 316 miles northward to the Samoa Peninsula on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay. The Marin and Sonoma portions of the rail right-of-way are now owned by the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART), and SMART will be responsible for planning and developing trail segments in those counties. The Conservancy is assisting the GRTA with preparation of the Master Plan for the approximately 252-mile portion of the right-of-way from the Sonoma/Mendocino border, near the community of Hopland, northward through the Cities of Ukiah, Willits, Fortuna, Rio Dell, Eureka, and Arcata, to its terminus on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay. Along the way, the trail will pass through redwood forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and the currently largely inaccessible wild and scenic Eel River Canyon, before skirting the edge of Humboldt Bay. As the right-of-way was formerly used for rail purposes, it consists of a gentle grade with railroad tracks, passes over a number of rail bridges and trestles, and through tunnels, some of which have collapsed. Much of the rail line is in good condition for conversion to trail, but in some areas erosive geology and deferred maintenance create challenges that will need to be addressed through careful planning.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project remains consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, as described in Exhibit 2.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,963,950
Previous Conservancy Authorization	\$3,500,000
Previous Executive Officer Augmentation	\$336,050
Project Total	\$6,800,000

The proposed authorization is derived from a FY 2021/22 appropriation from the General Fund of \$10,300,000 to the Conservancy “for the planning and reuse for assets of the North Coast Railroad Authority.” (Budget Act of 2021, AB 128, as amended by SB 170, Chapter 240, Statutes of 2021.) The North Coast Railroad Authority was changed to the Great Redwood Trail Agency and charged with converting the railroad rights-of-way to a new regional recreational trail (the Great Redwood Trail). (Government Code Sections 93000, et seq.) Of the FY 2021/22

appropriation for the Great Redwood Trail, \$3,500,000 will be used for Conservancy support costs over seven years.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) related to public access. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The proposed Great Redwood Trail will connect inland populations to the coast and will include segments of the California Coastal Trail. This authorization will allow the Conservancy to work with the GRTA, a public agency, to conduct planning and community engagement to facilitate future development of the Great Redwood Trail and is thus consistent with the purposes of Chapter 9.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed funding will assist with the planning of the Great Redwood Trail, including preparation of a Programmatic Environmental Impact Report, which will facilitate the future development of trail segments. The proposed funding will also assist with the rail banking process for the Great Redwood Trail, helping to meet the Conservancy's target of 252 miles of Great Redwood Trail railbanked.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project involves feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded, including preparation of a Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan, and is therefore statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262. Consistent with Section 15262, the project will include consideration of environmental factors, including as part of preparation of the EIR. The project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306, because it involves data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to any environmental resource. Other tasks to be funded are not a "project" for purposes of CEQA because they entail organizational and administrative activities of government. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.