

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 6, 2024

PRAIRIE CREEK AT ELK MEADOW CABINS HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

Project No. 21-008-02
Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Yurok Tribe to undertake the Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project, consisting of removing invasive plants and installing large wood features in an approximately 3,000-foot reach of lower Prairie Creek in Humboldt County.

LOCATION: Orick, Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects Concurrence](#)

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 hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Yurok Tribe (“the grantee”) to undertake the Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project, consisting of removing invasive plants and installing large wood features in an approximately 3,000-foot reach of lower Prairie Creek 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.

3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 68 as the source of that funding.
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 and monitor the project.

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 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$100,000 grant to the Yurok Tribe to implement the Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project, located partly on the Elk Meadows Cabins (EMC) property and partly on Redwood National Park property approximately 4 miles north of the town of Orick in Humboldt County. The project area is surrounded by Redwood National and State Parks (RNSP), which encompasses Redwood National Park and Prairie Creek State Park and runs 3,000 feet downstream from Little Lost Man Creek below Prairie Creek State Park (Exhibit 1). The project consists of removing invasive plants and installing large wood features on an approximately 3,000-foot reach of lower Prairie Creek (the “EMC reach”) to enhance riparian habitat to support endangered salmonids.

The project is a collaboration between the EMC landowner, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Redwood National Park, and Yurok Tribe Fisheries Department staff. Planning for the project was initiated when the EMC owner, desiring to promote habitat restoration on their property, contacted NOAA and NMFS to discuss restoration options in the EMC reach. Redwood National Park joined the discussions as a neighboring landowner and the Yurok Tribe joined the project team to provide technical and design expertise and in recognition of the land being part of the Tribe’s ancestral territory. In 2021, the Conservancy granted funds to the Tribe to collect data and prepare design plans. The 90% Design Report was completed in 2023 and is the basis for implementation.

The EMC reach of Prairie Creek has been significantly altered by the development of the floodplain as a former mill site where the cabins at Elk Meadow now stand, the construction of Highway 101, and the construction of a levee to protect the infrastructure from flooding. It is constrained by the levee and has long straight sections that are devoid of instream complexity, with incised banks and lacking sufficient riparian cover (see Exhibit 2, Photos). Following a 2017

assessment of the stream and habitat conditions on lower Prairie Creek, Redwood National Park identified large wood additions and riparian vegetation restoration as the most needed actions to immediately improve habitat for listed salmon.

Installing large wood features will increase pool depth and complexity of the stream, thus providing increased shelter for salmonids. They will also aid in the retention of spawning gravel and provide drought resilience for endangered coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead trout in Prairie Creek.

The project site is located within the lower two miles of Prairie Creek, a tributary of Redwood Creek. The Redwood Creek watershed was once a highly functional coastal redwood ecosystem, with cool shaded stream channels and unimpaired stream flow to the ocean supporting large salmonid populations. Industrial scale timber harvesting, the construction of flood control levees in the estuary, road and municipal infrastructure, and the conversion of wetlands and bottom lands to agricultural production have profoundly impacted stream conditions and water quality within the Redwood Creek watershed. The widespread reduction of old-growth redwood forests has increased water temperatures. These land use changes, further compounded by the watershed's erosive geology, have led to elevated sediment delivery and storage in stream channels, simplified instream habitat and decreased connectivity with floodplains and tributaries. The resulting condition of the watershed is one of large-scale reduction in wetland and estuarine habitat, loss of floodplain interaction and an exposed channel, lowered groundwater levels, increased water temperatures, and limited rearing habitat for juvenile salmonids.

Restoration and enhancement of salmonid habitat in lower Prairie Creek is particularly desirable. Despite its setting in the Redwood Creek watershed, and its condition of incised channels and disconnected flood plains throughout, Prairie Creek provides some of the highest quality salmon habitat on the west coast. According to a 2006 California Department of Fish and Wildlife assessment of the Redwood Creek watershed, including the Prairie Creek sub-watershed, the coho population found in Prairie Creek constitutes the majority of the coho found in the entire Redwood Creek system. The survey also found that Prairie Creek provides forage and habitat for Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. Its upstream spawning habitat is protected in federal ownership by RNSP, and even though the encompassing Redwood Creek basin suffers high water temperatures, lower Prairie Creek is a cool water refuge that remains at an adequate year-round temperature for salmonids. The proposed project, when implemented, will restore critical habitat for salmon and steelhead species.

The project builds on other ongoing restoration projects on lower Prairie Creek including the downstream adjacent RNSP-led Redwoods Rising project at Davison Meadow to add large wood and revegetate riparian cover, and the Conservancy-funded Redwood National and State Park Visitor Center and Restoration Project two miles downstream on the former Orick Mill A site at the confluence of Prairie Creek and Redwood Creek to enhance stream habitat and restore flood plains and wetlands. When considered together, these three projects will greatly enhance Prairie Creek as a wildlife corridor and help anchor it as a salmon stronghold. The project is in the severely disadvantaged community of Orick and, when implemented, will provide direct benefit of improved water quality and habitat for salmonids, an important economic resource

to the community. The NPS will support the effort by providing data collection and report preparation in support of federal environmental analysis review and consultations with resource agencies. NPS data will directly support the planning efforts.

Site Description: The project is located on private land operated as the Elk Meadow Cabins Resort located on the site of a former mill operation (Exhibit 2) on what was once active floodplain connected to Prairie Creek, and on public lands owned by Redwood National Park with a common property boundary in mid-creek. The project area spans 0.57 miles (3,000 linear feet) of stream and about 33.4 acres of valley bottom consisting of stream-side riparian forest and open meadow. It has low gradients and high habitat potential but is currently characterized by a simplified and straightened channel, a lack of instream wood, and limited cover and velocity refuge, loss of pools and loss of channel-pool connectivity, and increased sedimentation and water temperatures. The creek banks support sparse riparian vegetation dominated by even-aged alders with few conifers being recruited. Several areas are infested with highly invasive non-native plants including reed canary grass, English Ivy, European Thistle, and Himalayan blackberry. The channel is constrained on the left bank by a levee that protects Highway 101 and the Elk Meadow Cabins property from flooding.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Yurok Tribe has successfully managed multiple grants with the Conservancy for habitat restoration, including the ongoing restoration of lower Prairie Creek on the former Orick Mill A site and past and current projects on tributaries to the Klamath River. The Tribe's fiscal and operations staff have experience successfully administering Conservancy and similar grants with federal and other state agencies, and nonprofits that require extensive budget tracking, reporting, and progress invoicing. The Yurok Tribe's expertise includes engineering, design, surveying, and restoration construction.

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 is a good investment of state resources because restoration of instream complex wood structure to enhance critical salmon habitat on Prairie Creek will benefit the populations of coho salmon, chinook, and steelhead trout in the Redwood Creek watershed in northern California. Restoration of these salmonid populations is a statewide priority.

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 and the Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People's published maps indicate that the project is in Yurok ancestral territory. The Yurok Tribe has been a core partner since project inception, with Yurok Tribe Fisheries Department staff participating in the planning and design and decision making for all project elements. The Yurok Tribe will provide personnel to implement the project to restore important habitat for culturally significant salmonids within Yurok Ancestral Territory. This engagement and collaboration with the Yurok Tribe expanded out of the collaborative relationship established during the planning begun in 2015, and now construction begun in 2021, on the Orick Mill site restoration project downstream. The Pulikla Tribe of Yurok People (formerly the Resighini Rancheria) expressed support for fisheries and habitat enhancement projects within Yurok Ancestral Territory. They also requested that SCC and other project partners work collaboratively with all federally recognized Tribes of Yurok People and involve them much earlier in project development phases in the future.

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

The Project is designed to be self-sustaining long-term. The addition of large wood at this site will catalyze additional habitat enhancement as the installed large wood will rack additional wood over time to create additional salmonid and invertebrate habitat and will interact with stream flows to form habitat features such as scour pools and coarse riffles. Project implementation will lead to continued geomorphic change over time to improve habitat and increase the potential for spawning and rearing for salmonids.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project has provided, and will continue to provide, multiple benefits with significant positive impact. It will provide direct economic benefits to the Yurok Tribe, which is designated as a Severely Disadvantaged Community, as the lead construction crew. The project will utilize large wood sourced through RNSP's forest health restoration initiative, "Redwoods Rising", underway in the upper Prairie Creek watershed, amplifying ecological benefits within the watershed by reusing the harvested trees. Additionally, the project directly supports the federal and state goals of helping restore endangered salmonids.

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

The Project and team members developed out of the relationships and trust established between RNSP, NOAA, and the Yurok Tribe during the planning and implementation phases of the large restoration project at the former Orick Mill A site a few miles downstream.

The Project team is composed of representatives from NOAA, RNSP, Anthropocene Institute (a private scientific institute that provides technical representation for the private landowner), Elk Meadow Cabins private landowner, and the Yurok Tribe Fisheries Department – Design and Construction Program. In addition to collaborating among federal agencies, a non-profit organization, private landowner, and the Yurok Tribe, the design team has expressed interest in

providing natural resource educational opportunities for Elk Meadows Cabins guests to increase awareness about native habitats and species. The owner of Elk Meadow Cabins has also reached out to engage neighboring private landowners and has funded an independent peer review of the project design to confirm that the project will not affect downstream or neighboring properties and will not increase flood risk.

The Project is supported by California Senator Mike McGuire, Assemblymember Jim Wood, and Humboldt County Supervisor Steve Madrone, the private landowner, and Redwood National Park (Exhibit 3).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
US Department of the Interior, National Park Service	\$500,000
Project Total	\$600,000

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy to address "urgent sea-level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies" (The Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). 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; eligible projects include those that protect coastal watersheds and increase the resilience of coastal ecosystems to climate change impacts. Such projects include coastal resilience projects along the coast, projects that build resilience for coastal communities and public access, and coastal wetlands projects that protect and restore coastal habitat. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will restore and enhance coastal watershed lands for fish and wildlife.

Redwood National Parks is providing \$500,000 in federal funds it has received specifically for this project from the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, which provides funds to advance conservation, restoration, and resilience activities on public lands.

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 funding authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 (Sections 31251-31270) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding the enhancement of coastal resources.

Pursuant to § 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources, which, because of human-

induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. This project will implement actions that are needed to enhance the function of Prairie Creek, which has been altered by construction of levees and conversion of floodplains to meadows reducing habitat complexity, thereby enhancing habitat for salmonids and other coastal and marine resources.

Pursuant to Section 31252, the proposed project is located within an area identified in the Humboldt County Local Coastal Plan (LCP) (1982) as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems. The LCP identifies the need for restoration of sensitive habitats affecting coastal resources, including Redwood Creek and its habitat.

Chapter 3.41, Sections A.1.d. and A.1.g. of the LCP defines environmentally sensitive habitats as “[R]ivers, creeks, and associated riparian habitats including Redwood Creek...” and “[O]ther critical habitats for rare and endangered species listed on State or Federal lists”, respectively. Chapter 3.41, Section G requires that “the biological productivity and quality of coastal streams...appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms shall be maintained and restored” and identifies Redwood Creek among these streams. Prairie Creek is a critical tributary to Redwood Creek and supports the vast majority of state and federally listed endangered coho, Chinook and steelhead trout in the Redwood Creek system. The project site is located on Prairie Creek, approximately one and a half miles feet upstream of the confluence of Prairie and Redwood Creeks. Enhancing habitat in Prairie Creek benefits salmonids of Redwood Creek and is thus consistent with the LCP.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the project includes engagement with the Yurok Tribe in execution of plans developed by the Tribe.

Consistent with **Goal 1.2 Return Power to Tribes**, the proposed project was developed in partnership with the Yurok Tribe and supports work by the Yurok Tribe to restore riparian habitat on ancestral lands.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will restore approximately 0.57 miles of important coastal stream within the 34-acre project area.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will complete one anadromous fish habitat project.

Consistent with **Goal 4.3 Multi-benefit Nature-Based Climate Adaptation**, the project will restore riparian function and enhance habitat for endangered species using nature-based solutions.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

This project is statutorily exempt from CEQA pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56(a)(1). This section exempts projects that conserve, restore, protect, or enhance, and assist in the recovery of California native fish and wildlife, and the habitat upon which they

depend. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21065, the Conservancy is a public agency directly undertaking the Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project (the project), which may cause a direct physical change in the environment. Conservancy staff determined that:

- a) The project is exclusively intended to restore and assist in the recovery of habitat for California native fish and wildlife.
- b) The project will have incidental public benefits to commercial and recreational fisheries by restoring and enhancing critical habitat for threatened and endangered salmonids to contribute to the recovery of the northern California salmonid populations.
- c) The project will 1) result in long term net benefits to climate resiliency by increasing stream complexity immediately to create deeper pools and scours that will provide refuge from lower flows and higher water temperatures, as well as benefits to biodiversity by increasing stream complexity immediately, and by restoring the processes that create habitat over time; and 2) will include procedures and ongoing management for the protection of the environment.

Pursuant to section 21080.56(e), staff sought concurrence from the Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife that the project is exempt. Restoration of hydrology and ecological functions will restore habitat for native plants and wildlife at the project site. Pursuant to section 21080.56(f), the Project will not weaken or violate any applicable environmental or public health standards.

In accordance with this exemption, the project will promote climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery through restoration of functional riverine system connections between upstream and downstream restored river reaches at Davison Meadow and the former Orick Mill A site.

The Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife concurred with Conservancy staff that the Project is exempt from further CEQA compliance on May 28, 2024 (Exhibit 4). Pursuant to section 21080.56(g), the Conservancy filed a Notice of Exemption with the Office of Planning and Research on May 29, 2024.