

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

**GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL EEL RIVER CANYON PRESERVE
PLANNING PROJECT, PHASE 1**

Project No. 24-055-01
Project Manager: Louisa Morris

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$439,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Eel River Canyon Preserve Planning Project, Phase 1, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting community engagement, coordinating with California Native American tribes, and conducting vegetation management for an 11.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in unincorporated Trinity and Humboldt Counties.

LOCATION: Along the former Northwest Pacific Railroad line from the north side of Island Mountain tunnel to Cain Rock Railroad Bridge, in unincorporated Trinity and Humboldt Counties, California.

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Site 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 four hundred thirty-nine thousand dollars (\$439,000) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Eel River Canyon Preserve Planning Project, Phase 1, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting community engagement, coordinating with California Native American tribes, and conducting vegetation management for an 11.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in unincorporated Trinity and Humboldt Counties (“the project”).

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.

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 accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Wildlands Conservancy 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 \$439,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Eel River Canyon Preserve Planning Project, Phase 1, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting community engagement, coordinating with California Native American tribes, and conducting vegetation management for an 11.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail (GRT) in unincorporated Trinity and Humboldt Counties (“the project”).

The project area includes the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA)-owned 11.2-mile segment (GRT Segment #18) of the 307-mile GRT, extending from the north side of the Island Mountain tunnel in Trinity County to the Cain Rock Railroad Bridge in Humboldt County (Exhibit 1). This GRT segment is identified as a priority in the draft GRT Master Plan, as it is adjacent to two TWC Preserves, the Eel River Canyon Preserve and Emerald Waters Reserve. In 2021 and 2023, the Conservancy approved a total of \$5,950,000 in funding for TWC’s acquisition of the Eel River Canyon Preserve, formerly known as Lone Pine Ranch.

The Eel River Canyon Preserve offers a strategic public access point to the GRT and the Eel River. The Eel River Canyon is a beautiful and remote natural area that is currently largely inaccessible. Combined with TWC’s conservation acquisitions in this area, the Great Redwood Trail will offer recreational access for the public to this spectacular, wild region in Northern California.

The GRT is proposed within the 307-mile length of the former North Coast Railroad Authority right-of-way, from San Francisco Bay north to the Humboldt Bay. The GRT, once complete, will be the longest rail-trail in the nation. The portions of the rail right-of-way in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt counties are owned by the GRTA. The Marin and Sonoma portions of the rail

right-of-way are owned by the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART), and SMART will be responsible for planning and developing the GRT in those counties.

The Conservancy is assisting the GRTA with a Master Plan for the approximately 231-mile portion of the GRT from the Sonoma County/Mendocino County border, near Hopland, northward through the Cities of Ukiah, Willits, Rio Dell, Fortuna, Eureka, Arcata, and Blue Lake, to its terminus near the Humboldt Bay. Along the way, the trail will pass through redwood forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and the currently largely inaccessible scenic Eel River Canyon, before skirting the edge of Humboldt Bay. As the right-of-way was formerly used for railroad purposes, it consists of a gentle grade, passing over many rail bridges, trestles, and 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 and systematic planning. This project involves studies to support detailed trail design for an important segment of the GRT.

Resource studies for this project include a geotechnical study, historical and archaeological cultural resource investigations, and biological resource surveys. The geotechnical study will include a focused analysis of the Emerald Waters landslide area. Biological resource surveys will include a wetland delineation, botanical survey, wildlife habitat survey, threatened and endangered species surveys, and a botanical survey focused on plants with cultural significance to California Native American tribes. Studies will also identify ecological restoration opportunities in the project area.

Tribal outreach and coordination will be a significant component of this project. The GRTA's right-of-way passes through many tribal ancestral lands, and the former railroad on which GRTA's right-of-way is located was part of California's history of tribal genocide, forced relocation, and cultural erasure. The project area is in the Eel River Canyon, which is significant to California Native American tribes and is expected to have cultural resources which may include sacred sites. TWC will engage in coordination efforts with interested California Native American tribal community members during all stages of the GRT project. The studies and surveys completed under this planning grant will inform future planning and design for the GRT segment and protection of cultural and other resources in the project area.

Community engagement will also be a part of the project. TWC will coordinate with Revitalizing Opportunities for the Alderpoint Region (ROAR), the GRTA, Conservancy, and the selected archaeologist(s) to organize a series of meetings with tribes, non-profits and/or individuals with special ties to the project area. Meetings will inform fieldwork for the studies and will share study results as appropriate and may include site visits.

The project area (GRTA right-of-way) is currently overgrown with vegetation, making many project areas inaccessible. TWC will obtain an encroachment permit from GRTA so it can access the project area and perform vegetation management in partnership with the California Conservation Corps (CCCs). Vegetation management is needed to facilitate access to the trail alignment for the resource studies.

The project's resource studies will inform Great Redwood Trail Eel River Canyon Preserve Planning- Phase 2, which will consist of detailed trail planning and design, obtaining necessary permits for trail construction, and project-level CEQA findings.

Site Description:

The 11.2-mile Eel River Canyon Preserve Great Redwood Trail project site is located within the GRTA-owned right-of-way, between the north end of the Island Mountain tunnel and the Cain Rock Railroad Bridge. This 11.2-mile rail corridor is adjacent to the mainstem of the Eel River, which is classified as recreational within the National Wild and Scenic River System. The Eel River Canyon is important to local tribal communities that continue to live in the area as well as those who have been displaced from their ancestral lands. The historic Cain Rock Railroad Bridge is part of the project area, and TWC will coordinate with ROAR, who recently received a Conservancy GRT planning grant for the segment south of Alderpoint. Natural communities in the area include riparian woodlands, oak woodlands, and chaparral forests. Boulder Creek, Kekawaka Creek, and Haman Creek are tributaries to the Eel River on the same side as the Great Redwood Trail in the Eel River Canyon Preserve project area. The Eel River hosts anadromous fish, as do some of these tributaries.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: TWC is a California private non-profit public benefit corporation dedicated to providing no-cost passive recreation and education opportunities to the public and to preserving biodiversity. Over the past twenty-five years, TWC has established the largest nonprofit nature preserve system in California, comprised of twenty-five preserves encompassing over 200,000 acres of diverse mountain, valley, desert, river, and oceanfront landscapes. These preserves are open to the public free of charge for passive recreation, including camping, hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, birding, and more.

TWC has demonstrated experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the Conservancy for acquisitions including the Eel River Canyon Preserve, Estero Americano Coast Preserve, and Santa Margarita River Trails Preserve, and for public access improvements at the Jenner Headlands Preserve.

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 authorization will initiate important resource studies and surveys that are needed for future planning of this 11.2-mile segment of the GRT. The project will also provide community engagement and employment opportunities.

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 project includes and continues TWC's sustained and focused efforts to engage with California Native American tribes. Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT)'s reservation lands share a border with the Eel River Canyon Preserve, which is also the ancestral land of the Wailaki people, members of RVIT. Over the last three years, TWC staff have had numerous discussions with the RVIT Tribal Council, hosted tours on the preserve, and presented to the Council to discuss mutually beneficial goals and opportunities on the Eel River Canyon Preserve. TWC staff have participated in Tribal and community events in nearby Covelo, including Big Time, Eel River Forum, Earth Day, Round Valley High School Academic Achievement Day, and the Blackberry Festival. In collaboration with appropriate tribes, TWC is committed to developing a Tribal Co-Management Memorandum of Understanding as part of the Preserve's Management Plan. This planning project includes funding for California Native American participation in resource studies and surveys of the 11.2 -mile GRT segment.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will collect important resources and survey information that will inform future planning and design for the GRT segment adjacent to TWC's Eel River Canyon Preserve and Emerald Waters Reserve. Understanding resources along this trail segment is critical to ensuring that future trail planning provides protection for and avoids or mitigates impacts to these resources.

Eventually the new trail will be a public asset, offering recreation and economic opportunities for this depressed local economy, as well as essential opportunities for public connection to this beautiful, wild, and culturally significant area in remote rural Northern California.

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

The GRT Master Plan team held an in-person workshop with 70 attendees at the Alderpoint Volunteer Fire Hall on July 26, 2023, where TWC staff participated and helped to facilitate. The workshop had an in-depth focus on listening to the community's interests and concerns regarding the GRT and featured six hosted stations with opportunities to ask questions and record feedback. This community feedback has been incorporated into the draft GRT Master Plan, which recommends the Eel River Canyon Preserve GRT segment as a Tier 1 priority for development. Over the three years since purchasing the Eel River Canyon Preserve (formerly known as the Lone Pine Ranch), TWC staff have met many times with neighbors, community members, local Tribal Governments, and tribal community groups. These meetings have informed and provided the foundation for this GRT planning project.

Future tribal and other local community engagement will take diverse forms to maximize engagement of a broad spectrum of interests, providing opportunities to further develop relationships. Engagement will take place via phone calls, emails, and in-person and online meetings.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$439,000
Project Total	\$439,000

The anticipated source of funding for the project is an allocation of General Fund to the Conservancy for community outreach, pre-trail development activities, and trail construction for the Great Redwood Trail (Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 12, Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). Consistent with the funding source, the proposed project will carry out tribal and community outreach and conduct pre-trail development studies and surveys to support planning for a future segment of the Great Redwood Trail, as further described above.

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 accessways. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The GRT will connect to and include segments of the California Coastal Trail.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will improve recreational conditions within severely disadvantaged communities in unincorporated Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties, including nearby towns of Alderpoint, Covelo, Kettenpom, Mina, and Zenia.

Consistent with **Goal 1.4 Incorporate Workforce Development in Our Projects**, the proposed project incorporates workforce development in the project with opportunities for California Native American tribal and community members to obtain job training and work on the project, as well as collaboration with the California Conservation Corps for vegetation management.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will complete some of the initial planning work to support eventual construction of a new 11.2 -mile-long segment of the GRT, which is one of five flagship trails identified in the Conservancy’s 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project involves feasibility and planning studies 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 consider environmental factors. 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. Finally, the remainder

of the project, which involves vegetation management to facilitate access to conduct studies and does not involve the removal of any healthy, mature, or scenic trees, consists solely of minor alterations to land which are categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15304.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.