

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

MENDOCINO COASTAL TRAIL & ACCESS PLANNING

Project No. 24-043-01
Project Manager: Amanda Townsel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$215,050 to Mendocino Land Trust to conduct necessary surveys and studies, prepare initial designs, and complete permit applications for one-half mile of new California Coastal Trail near Albion, one mile of new California Coastal Trail connecting Schooner Gulch to Saunders Landing, and improved access to Hearn Gulch Beach in Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Various locations, Mendocino County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Photographs](#)
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 two hundred fifteen thousand and fifty dollars (\$215,050) to Mendocino Land Trust (“the grantee”) to conduct necessary surveys and studies, prepare initial designs, and complete permit applications for one-half mile of new California Coastal Trail near Albion, one mile of new California Coastal Trail connecting Schooner Gulch to Saunders Landing, and improved access to Hearn Gulch Beach in Mendocino County (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.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, Mendocino Land Trust 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 a system of public accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. Mendocino Land Trust 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 \$215,050 grant to Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to conduct necessary surveys and studies, prepare initial designs, and complete permit applications for two new California Coastal Trail segments, totaling one and a half miles, and improved beach access, near Albion and Point Arena in Mendocino County (the "project") (See Exhibit 1).

This project will support expansion of the California Coastal Trail (CCT) and help provide safer access to coastal resources, ensuring that local communities, visitors, and future generations of Californians will be able to visit, recreate, and enjoy the natural splendor of the Mendocino Coast. The new trails will connect existing CCT segments while adding one and a half trail miles, which supports the State's objective to complete the CCT system and address trail gaps along the California coast. Creating safer, more resilient access to Hearn Gulch Beach will allow more Californians and visitors to experience the beach and ocean.

MLT will work closely with state and local agencies, partners, and consultants to prepare plans, permit applications, and initial engineered designs required for the development of these three public access projects. Permitting will require approved Coastal Development Permits from Mendocino County Planning and Building for each trail, with a potential need for Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreements from the California Department Fish and Wildlife if the trail interfaces with jurisdictional wetlands.

Initial engineered designs will be completed under the oversight of a licensed civil engineer. All trails will be designed to meet California State Parks trail standards. The proposed trail segment between Schooner Gulch and Saunders Landing that will parallel Highway 1 and is within the State highway right-of-way will also need to meet any additional Caltrans requirements that may apply. Ease of construction, safety, avoidance of environmentally sensitive habitat areas and natural resources, and overall trail experience will be considered during the initial design phase.

Designs for the first proposed CCT segment will consist of an approximately half mile out-and-back blufftop trail (Exhibit 1, Figure 2). It will be located within a public access easement held by MLT near the town of Albion, about seventeen miles south of Fort Bragg. This public trail will provide access to the Albion headlands, an area that has long been privately owned and closed off to the public. The proposed trail will head west from California State Route 1 (Highway 1) along the northern side of the SCP (Soul Community Planet) Mendocino Coast Lodge, then follow the bluff edge, providing sweeping views of the Mendocino Coast and Pacific Ocean (Exhibit 2, Photos 1 & 2). This stretch of CCT, between Little River and the Navarro River, mostly uses the highway shoulder. The addition of the new trail would increase CCT mileage that is off the road, and create new public recreational space where Albion residents, surrounding communities, and visitors can safely experience the natural wonders of the coast. The new proposed trail will connect to the Albion Flats segment of the CCT, via Highway 1 and Albion River North Side Road, where there is a campground, boating facilities, and beach access.

Designs for the second proposed CCT segment will consist of an almost one mile blufftop trail that connects two popular public coastal access points on the Mendocino Coast, effectively closing a gap in the CCT between Schooner Gulch and Saunders Landing. The proposed trail will be located within the Caltrans right-of-way along Highway 1, approximately four miles south of the city of Point Arena (Exhibit 1, Figure 3). MLT has an established working relationship with Caltrans and has received a letter of support from Caltrans for the planning and permitting of this trail segment (Exhibit 3). This proposed trail segment will start along Highway 1, at the southern end of Schooner Gulch State Park, where the existing CCT provides scenic hikes and beach access to the geological wonders of Bowling Ball Beach, thence to Schooner Gulch State Beach. The proposed, nearly mile-long coastal trail will run south, adjacent to the western side of Highway 1, providing expansive views of the ocean and the striking, undeveloped Mendocino coastline. (Exhibit 2, Photo 3). At the southernmost end, the proposed trail will connect to the Saunders Landing Coastal Trail, which is currently in the planning and permitting phase supported by an earlier Conservancy grant. The existing CCT path between Schooner Gulch and Saunders Landing is on the highway shoulder. The addition of the new segment will provide a safer and more accessible recreational trail between these coastal access locations. Further, by closing this gap, the CCT will have a continuous, off-road segment that spans approximately three miles from Moat Creek to Hearn Gulch.

Located about five miles south of the city of Point Arena, the access to Hearn Gulch consists of a short, steep path leading from the blufftop, alongside the seasonal Hearn Gulch Creek, to Hearn Gulch Beach (Exhibit 2, Photo 4). The final descent, approximately twenty-five feet, consists of wood and rock steps with a rope and steel pole handrail. In 2007, the Conservancy provided funding to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (RCLC) to add the wood and a handrail to the existing, informal rock steps that had been established by historic foot traffic. RCLC has continued to maintain the trail, however stream and storm erosion have made this access unsafe and unusable (Exhibit 2, Photo 5). MLT is partnered with RCLC and has their support to create plans and designs to replace the existing access with a more sustainable set of steps that avoids Hearn Gulch Creek and is resilient to sea level rise. Safer, more resilient access to Hearn Gulch Beach will enable more residents and visitors to enjoy the wind-protected beach and the backdrop of near shore sea stacks and rock caves.

Site Description: This planning project features access improvements at three sites along the scenic Mendocino Coast.

The first access feature will be located near Albion, a small town on the Mendocino Coast with few public recreational opportunities. The proposed CCT segment will be created half mile north of town, within a public access easement owned by MLT. The site consists of open coastal headlands with grasses and some trees, providing panoramic views of the surrounding area, including the Albion River Bridge and Pacific Ocean (Exhibit 2, Photos 1, 2). A new trail will benefit surrounding communities by promoting healthy recreation, enhancing quality of life, and promoting economic growth.

The second access feature will be located four miles south of Point Arena, between Schooner Gulch State Beach and the Saunders Landing Coastal Trail. This will connect two public access locations, Schooner Gulch and Hearn Gulch, and effectively close a gap in the CCT. The almost mile long trail will be located within the Caltrans right-of-way along the western Highway 1. The site consists of open coastal headlands with grasses and coastal plant communities (Exhibit 2, Photo 3). The new trail will provide safer recreational opportunities for activities like whale watching, birding, photography, and enjoying the native flora.

The third access feature, at Hearn Gulch, is located five miles south of Point Arena and, being in the same area as Saunders Landing, shares the same flora and fauna communities.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) has proven experience and capacity to undertake planning, permitting, and preparing initial designs for new CCT segments and improving access facilities to Hearn Gulch Beach. MLT specializes in public access projects and has successfully completed numerous trail planning and CCT implementation projects throughout Mendocino County in partnership with the Conservancy. These include the Arena Cove Coastal Trail, Ten Mile River Estuary, Shady Dell, Old Smith Ranch, and Pelican Bluffs among the more recent.

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 as it contributes to the State's objective to complete the CCT system and address trail gaps along the California coast. The proposed project has a reasonable budget for trail and access planning and permitting. The estimated cost of biological surveys, cultural resource surveys, initial engineered designs, and land surveys is based on project scope, location, and CEQA requirements.

The cost of permits needed for this project have been provided by the Mendocino County Office of Planning and Building Services and are based on the current fee schedule.

This project is a logical extension of current and prior Conservancy investments in the area, including the Saunders Landing Coastal Trail and Hearn Gulch Headlands acquisition and access improvements.

The new CCT segments and improved beach access will provide safe recreational opportunities that will benefit local communities and visitors to the Mendocino Coast. Future partnerships between MLT, Caltrans, and community partners will help maintain the proposed CCT segments and ensure that the invested state resources will continue to benefit the public.

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes

MLT sent letters to local tribes describing the proposed project and plans for a public trail, which included location details and a map. The letter asked if the tribe would be willing to have a conversation about the project and to share their thoughts. Thus far, the Sherwood Valley Tribe has been the only respondent. MLT had a phone call with Sherwood Valley Tribe and has committed to continuing the dialogue and keeping them apprised of the project as it progresses.

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

The new CCT segments and improved beach access will be open to public use and will be maintained and protected by MLT. All three locations will be designed to be resilient to climate change, ensuring they will be accessible and usable for the benefit of the public. The proposed trail within the public access easement near Albion is located on a high bluff and resilient to sea level rise. Coastal erosion is always a concern, however, the blufftop portion of the easement is measured from the daily bluff edge and will therefore slowly move inland as the bluff erodes over time. The proposed CCT segment within Caltrans right-of-way is also at an elevation that is resilient to sea level rise and will have space to move if needed. The access to Hearn Gulch Beach will be reconstructed with materials that are durable in high salt environments and will be designed to be resilient to creek and wave erosion and to withstand high tides and storms.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

This project will provide safe, accessible recreational opportunities for residents and visitors to the Mendocino Coast. The proposed trail near Albion will benefit residents and surrounding communities by increasing access to public outdoor recreation spaces on the coast. The proposed trail between Schooner Gulch and Saunders Landing will provide a connection between two well-loved beach access locations, close a gap in the CCT, and reduce the need to travel by vehicle between the two locations. Improved access to Hearn Gulch Beach will make it more resilient to sea level rise, providing long-term accessibility to more people. The project will create safer access to coastal resources and open space, providing opportunities for healthy recreation, wildlife viewing, educational experiences, and socio-economic benefits.

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

MLT specializes in public access, and its board and staff represent segments of the community throughout Mendocino County. The proposed project was developed in part with strong public participation at community meetings hosted by MLT in multiple location along the Mendocino coast. In a recent survey of its supporters, MLT found that public access and trails were the piece of MLT’s mission that most resonated with survey respondents.

The proposed trail near Albion will run along the northern side of the SCP (Soul Community Planet) Mendocino Coast Lodge, and the Lodge has expressed support for the development of this trail. MLT will continue to engage with the SCP Lodge throughout the project.

MLT has had early contact with relevant tribal groups and will continue to have an open dialogue to keep all interested parties apprised of the project as it progresses.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$215,050
Project Total	\$215,050

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 plan for and develop initial designs for new sections of the California Coastal Trail (CCT) and associated facilities, a nonmotorized trail of statewide significance.

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 access ways to and along California’s coastline. The proposed project will close a gap in the CCT by creating a new trail connecting Schooner Gulch to Saunders Landing and will create a new section of the CCT near Albion, on land that had previously been privately owned and closed to the public.

Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast.

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division.

Consistent with these provisions, the recommended authorization will enable MLT, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, to plan and develop initial designs for approximately one and a half miles of new public trail and improved beach access along the Mendocino coast.

Section 31408 authorizes the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the CCT in consultation with State Parks, the California Coastal Commission, and Caltrans. Consistent with these provisions, the proposed project has and will continue to involve coordination with State Parks, the Coastal Commission, and Caltrans, which supports the proposed trail segment within its right-of-way along California State Route 1, south of Point Arena (Exhibit 3).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systematically Excluded Communities**, the two proposed CCT segments and improved beach access will serve disadvantaged and/or systemically excluded community members in the Albion, Point Arena, and surrounding areas by creating and improving recreational amenities.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will prepare plans, initial designs, and permit applications for approximately one and a half miles of new CCT and improved access to Hearn Gulch Beach.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed planning project consists of conducting necessary surveys and studies, developing initial designs, and completing permit applications for two segments of the CCT and improved access to Hearn Gulch Beach. Thus, the proposed project involves only data gathering, resource evaluation, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. These activities are statutorily exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded. The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, which exempts data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Additionally, specific to Hearn Gulch, the project is categorically exempt under Section 15302, which exempts replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced.

Consistent with Section 15262, the project will consider environmental factors. Consistent with Section 15306, the data collection and resource evaluation components of the project will not cause major or serious disturbance to the environment.

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