

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 13, 2025

After posting this staff recommendation, staff revised it as shown in underline. All exhibits remain the same. Staff made these revisions at the Conservancy meeting on February 16, 2025, prior to the Conservancy's adoption of the Resolution and Findings.

GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL AUGMENTATION

Project No. 22-009-01

Project Manager: Joel Gerwein, Louisa Morris, and Hannah Bartee

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$5,000,000 of funds appropriated to the Conservancy for the Great Redwood Trail to the Great Redwood Trail Agency to augment funding for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, coordination with California Native American Tribes, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, staffing for the Great Redwood Trail Agency, and other costs and services as may be required for the advancement of the Great Redwood Trail in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties.

LOCATION: Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps and Photos](#)

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

Exhibit 3: [February 15, 2024 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 five million dollars (\$5,000,000) to the Great Redwood Trail Agency to augment funding for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, coordination with California

Native American Tribes, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, staffing 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 authorization is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$5,000,000 to the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) to augment funding for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, coordination with California Native American Tribes, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, staffing for the 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 2024 for purposes of advancing the Great Redwood Trail. The term “project” in this staff recommendation refers to the development of the Great Redwood Trail. The project is more fully described in May 5, 2022 and February 15, 2024 Staff Recommendations, attached as Exhibits 2 and 3, respectively.

Conservancy staff have made significant progress on the project 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 initiate the project (Exhibit 2) and the Conservancy’s February 2024 authorization to disburse \$2,963,950 for additional tasks needed to advance the project (Exhibit 3).

The Conservancy’s previous authorizations resulted in GRTA hiring a consulting team to prepare a master plan and Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Great Redwood Trail. That process is well underway, with a draft master plan available for public comment released in April, 2024 and a draft PEIR and updated master plan to be circulated for public review in April, 2025. The master plan and companion PEIR will provide the general guiding principles for the development of the trail. An important part of the master planning process is extensive and ongoing community and tribal outreach. The Conservancy and GRTA have offered government to government consultation with all affected tribes and conducted four consultations. Conservancy and GRTA staff and consultants have hosted a tribal webinar, attended 14 tribal community events, presented to 9 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, 6 in person workshops, 3 online workshops, over 70 stakeholder meetings, and 800 surveys completed.

The Conservancy's previous authorizations have also supported GRTA and the Conservancy's 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). GRTA has initiated and work is underway to railbank the southern segment of the former railroad line, which stretches from Willits southward to the Sonoma and Mendocino County line.

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. Between 2022 and 2024, a draft master plan for the project was prepared and circulated for public comment. An Executive Director for the GRTA was hired and commenced work in January 2024, and a new Operations Manager for the GRTA was hired and commenced work in November 2024.

The specific tasks that still need to be completed for the project 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; 5) continued engineering, planning and other technical support; and 6) operations and maintenance of GRTA's right-of-way, such as vegetation management and trash clean-up.

Site Description: The Great Redwood Trail is proposed to stretch the entire length of the former North Coast Railroad Authority's 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, passing 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	\$5,000,000
Previous Conservancy Authorizations	\$6,463,950
Previous Executive Officer Augmentation	\$336,050
Project Total	\$11,800,000

The proposed authorization is derived from a FY 2024/25 appropriation from the General Fund of \$5,000,000 to the Conservancy “for a grant to the Great Redwood Trail Agency for purposes of developing the Great Redwood Trail.” (Budget Act of 2024, AB 107, as amended by the Budget Trailer Bill, SB 108, Chapter 35, Statutes of 2024.) Consistent with the purpose of these funds, this authorization will be encumbered in an agreement with the County of Sonoma for use by the GRTA for the project.

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 fund the work of 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 and construction 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 planning portion of the project is exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262 because it involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded, including preparation of the PEIR for the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan. Consistent with Section 15262, the project will include consideration of environmental factors, including as part of preparation of the PEIR. 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.

Operations and maintenance of the Great Redwood Trail right of way is exempt under 14 CCR Section 15301. Section 15301 consists of the operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use. Operation and maintenance of the Great Redwood Trail right of way is exempt under Section 15301 because it involves only operation of the right of way and maintenance of topographical features, such as vegetation management and trash clean-up.

The other tasks to be funded, such as staffing for GRTA and administrative and organizational development for GRTA, 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.