

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 13, 2025

**GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL: WILLITS TO LONGVALE
PLANNING PROJECT**

Project No. 24-063-01
Project Manager: Louisa Morris

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$503,400 to Mendocino Land Trust to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting outreach, coordinating with California Native American tribes, preparing 20% designs, and preparing environmental compliance documents for a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Along the former Northwest Pacific Railroad line from the north side of East Commercial Street in Willits to Longvale, north of the intersection of the former railroad line and Highway 162, in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino County, California.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 five hundred three thousand four hundred dollars (\$503,400) to Mendocino Land Trust (the grantee) to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting outreach, coordinating with California Native American tribes, preparing 20% designs, and preparing environmental compliance documents for a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Willits and unincorporated 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.

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. 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 grant of up to \$503,400 to Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of preparing resource studies and surveys, conducting outreach, coordinating with California Native American tribes, preparing 20% designs, preparing environmental compliance documents for a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail (GRT) in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino County (“the project”).

The project area includes the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA)-owned 12.7-mile segment (GRT Segments #10 and #11) of the 307-mile GRT, extending from the north side of East Commercial Street in the City of Willits to Longvale, north of the intersection of Highway 162 and the former railroad line, in unincorporated Mendocino County (Exhibit 1). This GRT segment is identified as a priority in the draft GRT Master Plan.

The City of Willits has completed the planning process and secured funding to construct 1.6 miles of GRT within city limits. The Conservancy helped fund construction of this segment of GRT through Willits, which will be a rail-with-trail. The north side of East Commercial Street in Willits marks the beginning of the railbanked section of this former railroad line. The project will plan how to convert this 12.7-mile railbanked section to a public trail.

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.

The project includes conducting studies that will inform detailed trail design, preparing designs, and preparing environmental compliance documents for an important segment of the GRT. The exact cost and effort to prepare environmental documents for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is unclear at this time and will depend on the results of the resource studies. If the budget allows, the project will include preparation of environmental compliance documents and permit applications.

Resource studies for the project include a geotechnical study, historical and archaeological cultural resource investigations, and biological resource surveys. The geotechnical study will include focused analysis of landslide areas. 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. Using the results of the resource studies, as well as the tribal coordination and outreach efforts, the project will prepare 20% designs for this 12.7-mile GRT segment. GRTA expects to certify a Programmatic EIR for the GRT in Fall 2025, and the CEQA documents to be prepared as part of this project will take into account that Programmatic EIR.

Tribal outreach and coordination is 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 adjacent to Outlet Creek, which is significant to California Native American Tribes. Significant tribal concerns have been raised about the GRT broadly, and the project will engage in coordination efforts with interested California Native American tribal community members to seek to address these concerns during all stages of the project.

The project includes outreach. MLT will coordinate with the City of Willits, the GRTA, the 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.

Site Description:

The 12.7-mile Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale project site is located within the GRTA-owned right-of-way, between the north side of East Commercial Street in Willits to Longvale, north of the intersection of Highway 162 and the former railroad line, in unincorporated

Mendocino County. This 12.7-mile rail corridor is adjacent to Outlet Creek, a tributary to the Eel River. Outlet Creek is important to local California Native American tribal communities that continue to live in the area as well as those who have been displaced from their ancestral lands. Natural communities in the area include riparian woodlands, coniferous forests, and oak woodlands. Outlet Creek hosts anadromous fish, as do some of its tributaries.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: MLT is a California private non-profit public benefit corporation dedicated to conserving and restoring habitat, scenic areas, and working lands while also providing public access to beautiful places. MLT has demonstrated significant experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the Conservancy for acquisitions, including Navarro Point and Pelican Bluffs, while also partnering with the Conservancy to plan, construct, operate, and manage over a dozen segments of the California Coastal Trail (CCT) on the beautiful Mendocino Coast.

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 12.7-mile segment of the GRT. The project will include outreach and create 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 MLT's sustained and focused efforts to engage with California Native American tribes. This planning project includes funding for California Native American tribal participation in resource studies and surveys of the 12.7-mile GRT segment. As stated above, significant tribal concerns have been raised about the GRT broadly, and this planning effort will seek to address these tribal concerns on these segments of the GRT.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will include collection of important resources and survey information that will inform future planning and design for the GRT segment adjacent to Outlet Creek, between Willits and Longvale. Understanding resources along this trail segment is critical to ensuring that trail planning provides protection for and avoids or mitigates impacts to these resources.

Once constructed, the new trail will be a public asset, offering recreation and economic opportunities for a severely disadvantaged community, 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 45 attendees at the City of Willits on March 23, 2023, where MLT staff participated. The workshop focused on listening to the community’s interests and concerns regarding the GRT and featured six hosted stations with opportunities to obtain information, ask questions, and record feedback. This community feedback has been incorporated into the draft GRT Master Plan, which recommends these Willits to Longvale segments as a Tier 1 priority for development.

Future tribal and other local 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	\$503,400
Project Total	\$503,400

The anticipated source of funding for the project is an allocation from a Fiscal Year 2023/2024 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for community outreach, pre-trail development activities, and trail construction planning 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 anticipated funding source, the proposed project will carry out tribal and community outreach and conduct pre-trail development studies and surveys to inform planning for a future segment of the Great Redwood Trail, as 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 and nonprofit organizations to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. Consistent with Section 31409, the authorization will fund work to plan a 12.7-mile inland, segment of the Great Redwood Trail, which 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 the nearby City of Willits.

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.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will complete much of the planning work to support proposed construction of a new 12.7-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 Title 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.

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