COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 20, 2025

EEL RIVER NATIVE PLANT NETWORK

Project No. 25-036-01
Project Manager: Amanda Townsel

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Authorization to disburse up to $181,400 to Friends of the Eel River to undertake the Eel River Native Plant Network Project in anticipation of dam removal in the upper Eel River basin, consisting of: (1) launching a regional native plant network to assess, coordinate, and increase the regional capacity to produce native plants for Eel River watershed restoration projects beginning with Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties; (2) developing a feasibility report and a strategic plan; (3) hosting meetings and seed harvesting trainings; and (4) developing and launching a website.

LOCATION: Lake Pillsbury, Lake County; Alderpoint, Humboldt County; and Round Valley Reservation, Mendocino County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Maps

Exhibit 2: Project 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 one hundred eighty one thousand four hundred dollars ($181,400) to Friends of the Eel River (the "grantee") to undertake the Eel River Native Plant Network Project in anticipation of dam

removal in the upper Eel River basin, consisting of: (1) launching a regional native plant network to assess, coordinate, and increase the regional capacity to produce native plants for Eel River watershed restoration projects beginning with Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties; (2) developing a feasibility report and a strategic plan; (3) hosting meetings and seed harvesting trainings; and (4) developing and launching a website (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.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and, if required by the funding source, the source of that funding.

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 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Functions of the State Coastal Conservancy and the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Friends of the Eel 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 an amount up to $181,400 to Friends of the Eel River to undertake the Eel River Native Plant Network Project in anticipation of dam removal in the upper Eel River basin, consisting of: (1) launching a regional native plant network to assess, coordinate, and increase the regional capacity to produce native plants for Eel River watershed restoration projects beginning with Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties; (2) developing a feasibility report and a strategic plan; (3) hosting meetings and seed harvesting trainings; and (4) developing and launching a website (the project). The project will provide social organization for planning and for habitat restoration plans in anticipation of the removal of Scott and Cape Horn dams on the Eel River, an outcome likely to follow the recent surrender of hydropower license P-77 by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company.

Ecological restoration following dam removal, such as restoration of reservoir sites, typically requires a large supply of native, preferably locally sourced, seeds and plants. For example, to revegetate the roughly 2,000-acre restoration area that resulted from the removal of the Lower Klamath River Project, which included the deconstruction of four dams and draining of their associated reservoirs, the Yurok Tribe and its partners collected and propagated around 20 billion native seeds (~72,000 pounds), representing more than 98 culturally and ecologically important species.

Sourcing and using native species that are already adapted to the local conditions can increase establishment and survivability of the plants. This in turn contributes to ecological resiliency, and recovery of ecosystem functions. However, on the North Coast, the availability of native plant products in both the diversity and volume needed is currently insufficient for many restoration projects. Due to limited regional production capacity, native plant materials—such as seeds, bareroot trees and shrubs, and herbaceous plugs—used in restoration projects are often propagated outside the region. This outsourcing has significant environmental and social consequences.

According to the California Native Plant Society's California Native Seed Strategy for Ecological Restoration, "[n]ative seeds are a critical piece of these [ecological restoration projects] and other nature-based solutions that focus on climate change, drought, extreme wildfire, and other stressors. However, current seed stock is insufficient to meet growing needs… California faces an urgent and growing need to coordinate efforts to ramp up supply to meet demand… Improving coordination will affect every stage of the native seed production process, including collection; processing; increase; certification; storage; and, ultimately, use for ecological restoration."

To meet the demand for native plants for regional restoration projects, species are frequently chosen based on traits like ease of seed propagation, commercial scalability, rapid growth, or adaptability to non-local climates, such as California's Central Valley. These criteria often come at the cost of genetic diversity and species availability, forcing restoration projects to rely on what's available rather than what's ecologically appropriate. Transporting plant materials between collection, propagation, and planting sites increases both the carbon footprint and the financial cost of projects. Moreover, producing native plants outside the region sidelines local communities and traditional land stewards, missing critical opportunities to integrate tribal ecological knowledge and support the economies of disadvantaged communities and California Native American tribes.

In anticipation of dam removals in the upper Eel River basin, the project will establish the Eel River Native Seed Network (the Network) to address the urgent need for increased regional production of native plants for restoration efforts. Drawing on successful models from other native plant networks across the West, the Network will unite a diverse group of regional

stakeholders from across the spectrum of native plant work, including tribes, commercial nurseries, restoration consultants, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, municipalities, and utilities. While many of these entities are already pursuing small-scale efforts to boost local native plant production, they often operate in isolation. This project will foster collaboration by connecting these efforts, encouraging communication, and building a cohesive regional strategy. By aligning stakeholders, the Network will maximize the impact of grant funding, reduce duplication of efforts, and promote the sharing of knowledge and resources.

The project will begin with the development of a website for the Network to store and share information with members, partners, and the public about the project's planning and capacity building for post-dam removal revegetation. The launch of the website will coincide with the first Network meeting, anticipated to be held in Spring 2026. The project will convene three initial meetings of the Network to lay the foundation for coordinated regional restoration efforts. The first meeting will formally establish the Network and will focus on developing shared operating principles, defining collective goals, and discussing regional needs and opportunities. Friends of the Eel River has already held around thirty one-on-one meetings with potential Network participants and has a goal of having at least fifty stakeholder entities in the Network by the end of the project.

During the second meeting, anticipated to be held in Fall 2026, the Network will begin analyzing the region's capacity to supply native plants for post-dam restoration projects, beginning with the revegetation of the Potter Valley Hydroelectric Project (PVP) footprint. Projected to begin as early as 2028, the deconstruction of Pacific Gas & Electric's (PG&E) century-old hydroelectric facility will include the removal of Cape Horn and Scott dams and the draining of Lake Pillsbury and Van Arsdale Reservoir, which currently inundate over 2,400 acres. Once the reservoirs are drawn down, the newly exposed land will require a large revegetation effort to restore the river ecosystem to a healthy, resilient state.

The PVP has diverted water from the Eel River to the Russian River basin to bolster the water supply for agriculture and communities in Sonoma and Mendocino counties since 1908. To continue the diversions after the PVP is deconstructed a joint powers authority, the Eel-Russian Project Authority (ERPA), was created to operate a new water diversion facility, the New Eel Russian Facility (NERF). Earlier this year, ERPA, the Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT), and other stakeholders entered into a water diversion agreement that, among other things, will transfer PG&E's water rights to RVIT and establish the Eel River Restoration Fund. Under the agreement, ERPA will pay RVIT one million dollars annually to lease its water rights for the NERF water diversions, and ERPA will make annual restoration payments of $750,000-$1 million per year to the Eel River Restoration Fund.

Applied River Sciences is developing a revegetation report estimating the quantity and type of native plant products needed for PVP. That vegetation report is not part of this project;

however, when that report is finished, the project will develop a feasibility report of regional capacity to supply native plants needed for post-dam removal revegetation. This will include cost estimates of using locally sourced native plants for the PVP revegetation, which the Network plans to present to PG&E. The PVP feasibility report will serve as a model for future revegetation initiatives and a launching point for scaling up regional native plant production, which is why this project focuses on the counties of Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino instead of all counties within the Eel River watershed.

Planned for Spring 2027, the third Network meeting will use information gathered from the first two meetings to begin drafting a strategic plan for the future of the Network that identifies resources and gaps in the region's capacity to produce native plant products and actionable strategies to fill those gaps with funding or resources. The final version of the strategic plan will be produced after the third network meeting.

Decommissioning of the PVP and the expected, long-term restoration funding provided by the NERF, combined with the unmet need for native plants, presents a significant economic opportunity for the region. Capitalizing on this, as part of the project, the Network will facilitate workforce training focused on seed harvesting in underserved communities, increasing the region's capacity to harvest native plants post-dam removal. Native seed collection is the foundation of native plant production and is an accessible job skill that can be used in a variety of green careers.

As part of the project, the Network, in partnership with the Great Basin Institute, will host one native seed harvesting workshop using the Bureau of Land Management's Seeds of Success Program trainings and protocols. The workshop is currently planned for late Summer 2027 in Alderpoint, a rural, severely disadvantaged community located on the mainstem of the Eel River in southern Humboldt County.

The project also includes three weeks of seed harvesting training sessions for RVIT. The Network will partner with the Yurok Tribe to provide these training sessions. It is particularly important to work with the Yurok Tribe, which has developed relevant expertise from its post-dam removal restoration and revegetation work on the Klamath River.

Site Description: The third largest river system in California, the Eel River originates on Bald Mountain in Mendocino County and empties into the Pacific around 10 miles south of the city of Eureka in Humboldt County. The watershed spans 2.3 million acres (~3,700 square miles) across Colusa, Glenn, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, and Trinity Counties, and consists of nearly 3,500 river miles. Surrounded by the Mendocino National Forest, the river's headwaters are dammed forming Van Arsdale Reservoir by Cape Horn Dam, and Lake Pillsbury by Scott Dam. Blocking access to over 280 miles of salmonid habitat, the PVP has significantly impaired Eel River fisheries. Once producing California's third-largest salmonid fishery, the Eel River today is

an impaired waterway under the Clean Water Act. Habitat degradation in the watershed from land use practices, such as logging, cannabis cultivation, road and railroad construction, agriculture, and residential development, have led to significant declines of anadromous fish populations, which impairs commercial, recreational, and tribal harvest.

Although degraded, the landscape still supports significant biological diversity. The Eel River is critical habitat for several threatened and endangered species of salmonids, including Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast Coho, Northern California summer and winter steelhead, and California Coastal Chinook. Other special status aquatic species include Green Sturgeon, Pacific and Western Brook Lamprey, Foothill Yellow-Legged Frog, and more. Special status plant species include three-fingered morning glory, Greene's narrow-leaved daisy, western lily, and more. Finally, the Eel River watershed is habitat for a wide diversity of special status terrestrial wildlife, including marbled murrelet, Northern spotted owl, Townsend's big-eared bat, Pacific fisher, Humboldt marten, and more.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Friends of the Eel River is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with decades of experience managing consultants and leading coalitions to amplify its efforts. For the past eight years it has facilitated the Free the Eel coalition, leading semi-monthly or monthly meetings, collecting and synthesizing stakeholder input, and navigating group decision-making processes. Other coalitions it has led in the past decade include the successful "No Coal in Humboldt" coalition and the on-going "Great Redwood Trail Friends" coalition. As part of collecting the best available science for its advocacy work, it has effectively administered grants that fund work with a variety of consultants, including hydrologists, geologists, fisheries biologists, and attorneys.

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.**

Through the establishment of the Network, this project will deliver multiple, long-term benefits by addressing regional restoration needs in anticipation of dam removal through a collaborative, community-driven approach. The Network will promote sustained community input to regional restoration capacity building by facilitating information sharing; leveraging shared resources; and supporting workforce skill development that aligns with regional

restoration needs in rural, economically depressed communities. The project will help support regional restoration work that restores and enhances significant natural resources, which will advance regional and statewide plans, including:

- Pathways to 30×30: Accelerating Conservation of California's Nature
- California Salmon Strategy for a Hotter, Drier Future: Restoring Aquatic Ecosystems in the Age of Climate Change
- California State Wildlife Action Plan
- California Water Action Plan
- Steelhead Restoration and Management Plan
- California Native Plant Society's Seed Strategy
- Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon

3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes.

Tribes have inherent rights and responsibilities to steward their land and resources, as they have done since time immemorial. In respect and support of these rights, an important part of this project is to leverage collective resources to ensure that tribes, specifically the RVIT, are centered in Eel River restoration. The project will support tribal participation in Network meetings and workforce development trainings. The Network will partner with the Yurok Tribe to provide seed harvesting training for RVIT, recognizing that the government-to-government relationship that tribes have is powerful and makes for the most culturally appropriate knowledge sharing.

Friends of the Eel River has already had meetings with multiple regional tribes and has extended invitations to meet with more to discuss the project and invite them to participate in the Network. Friends of the Eel River has also met with native people who may not be affiliated with federally recognized tribes, and native-led nonprofit organizations. This outreach complements the Conservancy grant to CalWild to conduct outreach to a variety of groups and tribal entities in the Upper Eel, including those from Lake County.

The project prioritizes tribal leadership by supporting tribal workforce development and capacity building and fostering intertribal knowledge exchange. Tribally led conservation has been identified by the State as a key to the success of the 30x30 initiative, and the project supports tribal stewardship and traditional management that can advance biodiversity goals for the State.

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

The project will increase the North Coast region's ability to produce native plant products for restoration projects post-dam removal, which will provide environmental and local economic benefits now and in the future. The project will include three initial meetings of the Network. Notes and resources from each meeting will be posted on the Network website, which will

make the information accessible to more people and will support the Network to leverage collective resources and facilitate future collaboration. After the third Network meeting, the Network will develop a strategic plan that includes plans for future sustainability of the project. Friends of the Eel River is already in the process of pursuing funding for later phases of the Network, including potential grants through the California Department of Fish and Wildlife Cannabis Restoration Grant Program, the California Native Plant Society, and Wildlife Conservation Board. Beyond that, Friends of the Eel River has reviewed models of other regional native seed networks that are working toward self-sustainability

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Generating more native seeds and plants in the region where they will ultimately be used for restoration projects has several specific benefits, including protecting genetic diversity of wild harvested seed by avoiding reductions in germination rates caused by seed transportation; reducing the carbon footprint of restoration projects; generating new sustainable jobs; and reducing costs and timelines of restoration projects.

The project will focus resources on workforce development in underserved communities and on tribal economic development programs. It will connect a wide range of stakeholders to promote regional collaboration. Many organizations are already pursuing projects to increase native plant production locally and on a small scale but are not communicating with the broader native plant community. By connecting so many stakeholders, the project will amplify the above-mentioned benefits and ensure that grant funding goes farther in the community by sharing collective resources and not duplicating efforts.

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

A significant portion of the project is holding Network meetings and collating stakeholder input. These stakeholders include staff from city and county natural resource departments, state and federal agency staff, tribal staff and contractors, nonprofit organizations, commercial nurseries, and more. Initial meetings were conducted by Friends of the Eel River to gauge interest and gain an understanding of the general regional needs related to native plant production or use in restoration projects. After many hours of conversations, Friends of the Eel River has an increasingly clear picture of the under-utilized collective resources available, including unused greenhouse space and seed storage facilities. Further community engagement will catalogue and plan for how to engage these resources.

Stakeholders who will be engaging in the work must be at the center of developing the plans for how to grow the regional capacity. Many entities are currently working on projects to prepare for post dam-removal restoration, or increase local native plant production, but are not communicating with potential partners and allies. The project will encourage these important connections.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$181,400**
Sage Foundation (Secured)	$12,400
Project Total	**$193,800**

The Conservancy funds for the project are expected to come from a fiscal year 2021-2022 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoors Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68), codified in Public Resources Code (PRC), Sections 8000-80173.

Consistent with Chapter 1 of Proposition 68, the project will provide workforce education or training, which may create more job opportunities, for disadvantaged communities. Partnering with both the Great Basin Institute and the Yurok Tribe, this project will facilitate workforce trainings on seed harvesting for severely disadvantaged communities (PRC, Section 80001(b)(5)).

Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources pursuant to Division 21 (PRC, Section 80120(c)). The definition of "protection" includes restoration; and the definition of "restoration" includes planting native species and related planning (PRC, Section 80002(l), (m)). Consistent with this funding source, the project will support restoration in the Eel River watershed by improving coordination of regional facilities to plant native species; and improve instream, riparian, plant, and wildlife habitats to support the natural environment and salmonids, a coastal and ocean resource.

Chapter 9 authorizes the Conservancy to provide grants for the protection, restoration, and improvement of coastal forest watersheds, including managed forest lands, forest reserve areas, redwood forests, and other forest types, and for projects that improve water quality and supply, increase coastal watershed storage capacity, reduce fire risk, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, or improve coastal forest health (Section 80120(e)). Consistent with this funding source, the project will increase the region's capacity to improve water quality and supply, reduce fire risk, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, and improve coastal forest health. Further, most of the Eel River watershed is densely forested with redwood and other conifers. Roughly 50% of the lands within the watershed are public lands, including over 600,000 acres of the Mendocino and Six Rivers National Forest. The upper Eel basin, where the Potter Valley Project is located, is mostly surrounded by the Mendocino National Forest.

The project is consistent with the funding guidelines for expenditure of Proposition 68 adopted by the Conservancy on December 6, 2018 as described in various sections of the staff recommendation.

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 project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3, Sections 31111 and 31113 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

Pursuant to Section 31111, in implementing Division 21, the Conservancy may fund or perform any of the following: (a) prepare plans and feasibility studies; (b) provide technical assistance; or (c) award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for (a) or (b). Public Resources Code, Section 71132(a)(1) directed the California Strategic Growth Council to develop technical assistance (TA) guidelines for state agencies and required the TA guidelines include "[p]rocedures and standards for state agencies providing direct [TA] to under-resourced communities." The resulting guidelines, "Technical Assistance Guidelines for State Agencies August 2020," define TA as "[t]he process of providing targeted support to an agency, organization, or community with a development need or resource gap. TA may be delivered in many ways, such as one-on-one consultation, small group facilitation, technical resources and analysis, or through a web-based clearinghouse. TA is one of the most effective methods for building the capacity of an organization."

Consistent with Section 31111(c), the Conservancy will award a grant to a nonprofit to prepare plans and provide TA. Namely, the proposed project is for a grant to Friends of the Eel River, a nonprofit organization, to plan and provide targeted technical assistance to under-resourced communities, specifically severely disadvantaged communities, on capacity building and economic opportunities that help fill a deficit in regional native plant production capacity.

Pursuant to Chapter 3, Section 31113(b)-(c), the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations for projects within its jurisdiction that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, prioritizing projects that maximize public benefit and accomplish items such as reducing greenhouse gas emission and conserving biodiversity. Consistent with this Section, the Eel River is a coastal draining watershed within the Conservancy's jurisdiction, and the project involves planning around local, native plant products that reduce the carbon footprint of restoration projects and increases ecosystem resilience. Through the project, the Network will assess, coordinate, and determine means to increase the region's capacity to produce native plants; thereby supporting coastal estuarine restoration projects with revegetation (i.e., natural infrastructure) supplies.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goals 1.1, Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities,** and **1.3, Support Meaningful Engagement by Systemically Excluded Communities**, the project will engage lesser-served and lesser-resourced rural communities, tribes, and local governments of the Upper Eel watershed. The project is centered on engaging members of these communities to support their participation in sustainable economic development. The community of Alderpoint and the Round Valley Reservation are severely disadvantaged communities, as defined by Proposition 68 and Statewide Parks Program Community FactFinder.

Consistent with **Goal 1.2 Return Power to Tribes**, the project prioritizes tribal leadership by supporting tribal workforce development and capacity building and fostering intertribal knowledge exchange.

Consistent with **Goal 1.4, Incorporate Workforce Development**, the project will support pathways for local and systemically excluded communities to build skills that align with regional restoration needs and are transferable to other green jobs.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the project will increase the region's capacity to restore and enhance the Eel River, a coastal watershed, and the Potter Valley Project footprint after dam removal.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies), which exempts projects involving only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the agency or board have not approved, adopted, or funded and does not apply to the adoption of a plan that will have a legally binding effect on later activities.

The project is categorically exempt under CEQA, pursuant to Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15306 (Information Collection), which exempts projects involving basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The activities may be strictly for information gathering purposes, or as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.

The project is exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15061(b)(3) (Common Sense), which exempts projects that that can be seen with certainty as having no possibility of having a significant effect on the environment.

This project includes information gathering and planning around a region's capacity to produce native plants for restoration projects by hosting meetings and various trainings, developing a feasibility report and a strategic plan, and information sharing. It does not involve significant physical alteration of the project site, considers environmental factors, and can be seen with certainty as having no possibility of having a significant effect on the environment.

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