

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

November 20, 2025

Ta'che—Nóó-nih Yaash Acquisition

Project No. 25-033-01

Project Manager: Morgan Wright

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$800,750 to Sanctuary Forest, Inc. to: (1) acquire the 255-acre Ta'che—Nóó-nih Yaash Property to protect, restore, and enhance native species, habitats and waterways; protect cultural landscapes, features and attributes; and provide opportunities for compatible California Native American tribal access and potential limited public access in Whitethorn, Humboldt County; (2) remove cannabis infrastructure; (3) transfer the property to the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council; and (4) conduct initial stewardship planning for the property.

LOCATION: APN 220-111-005, Ta'che—Nóó-nih Yaash (Mattole -- Bear Cub), Whitethorn, Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [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 (the "Conservancy") hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed eight hundred thousand seven hundred fifty dollars (\$800,750) to Sanctuary Forest, Inc. (the "grantee") to: (1) acquire the 255-acre Ta'che—Nóó-nih Yaash Property to protect, restore, and enhance native species, habitats and waterways; protect cultural landscapes, features and attributes; and provide opportunities for compatible California Native American tribal access and potential limited public access in Whitethorn, Humboldt County; (2) remove cannabis infrastructure; (3) transfer the property to the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council; and (4) conduct initial stewardship planning for the property.

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents for the acquisition including, without limitation, the appraisal, purchase and sale agreement, deed, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment, and title report;
 - b. A baseline conditions report; and
 - c. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be held, tended, and cared for to protect, restore, and enhance native species, habitats and waterways; protect cultural landscapes, features and attributes; and provide opportunities for compatible California Native American tribal access and potential limited public access.
4. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
5. Funding from the Conservancy, as well as from other funding sources requiring acknowledgment, shall be recognized on the grantee's website, the design and content of which are to be approved by the Executive Officer.
6. Prior to the disbursement of funds for removal of cannabis infrastructure and stewardship planning, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:
 - a. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
 - b. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
 - c. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
 - d. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Sanctuary Forest, Inc. is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council 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 \$800,750 grant to Sanctuary Forest, Inc. (SFI) to: (1) acquire the 255-acre Ta'che—Nóó-nih Yaash Property (the "property") to protect, restore, and enhance native species, habitats and waterways; protect cultural landscapes, features and attributes; and provide opportunities for compatible California Native American tribal access and potential limited public access in Whitethorn, Humboldt County; (2) remove cannabis infrastructure; (3) transfer the property to the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council (the "Council"); and (4) conduct initial stewardship planning for the property. Together, the acquisition of the property, removal of cannabis infrastructure, subsequent transfer to the Council, and conducting initial stewardship planning is referred to as the "project." The project will protect and enhance critical habitat within the Ta'che (Mattole River) watershed—an undammed river that supports threatened and endangered species such as coho salmon, steelhead, and Pacific lamprey. The property includes cold-water refugia, essential for the survival of these species amid a warming climate. This project also fulfills a long-unmet need for tribal cultural access and stewardship in a region where traditional land relationships have been severely disrupted by genocide, forced removal, and dispossession of the Sinkyone and other neighboring tribes. Without permanent protection, both the ecological integrity and cultural values of the property are at risk of degradation and loss.

The property includes approximately one mile of the Ta'che (Mattole River) mainstem, spanning both sides of the river, and 1,500 feet of Nóó-nih Yaash (Bear Cub Creek). These waterways provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened species, and support a rich diversity of native plants and animals. The property is primarily forested land, immediately adjacent to Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, which features approximately 7,700 acres of forested land. The property is also adjacent to the King Range National Conservation Area—68,000 acres of public land. Together, these lands link over 150,000 acres of conserved lands in the North Coast region, significantly contributing to the ecological integrity of the area, and offering potential for long-term, culturally informed environmental protection and stewardship. Two derelict structures, now entombed in black mold, and cannabis related infrastructure, sit on the property and are degrading the site. The structures will be removed as part of the project. The project will be conducted in partnership with the Council, a nonprofit organization consisting of 10 tribes. The Council owns and operates over 4,000 acres of land, most of which was acquired in conjunction with the Conservancy in 1997, a very early example of tribal rematriation. Meaningful tribal engagement is discussed in Selection Criteria #3 below. The acquisition and land transfer to the Council will provide a means to restore the land and protect its resources in perpetuity.

The project will revitalize critical habitats for native species and traditional foods and renew intergenerational relationships that sustain the health of land, water, air, and tribal communities. This project supports cultural revitalization, enhances climate resilience by protecting cold water refugia, and contributes to a growing network of conserved lands along the North Coast.

As a land and water trust whose mission is to conserve land in the Ta'Che (Mattole River) watershed, SFI will acquire the property and transfer it to the Council. Upon acquiring the property, the Council plans to implement nature-based indigenous stewardship practices that will directly address the need to protect critical habitat, conserving 255 acres within the Ta'che (Mattole River) watershed. Through collaborative engagement, SFI will initiate the removal of unpermitted structures and debris associated with past cannabis cultivation. The Council may potentially provide a limited public access component to be conducted in partnership with SFI, including guided walks on the property as an opportunity for public education.

The project includes key pre-acquisition activities, which may include obtaining a survey needed to determine legal access, renewing a 30-year Bureau of Land Management right-of-way agreement, obtaining a final property appraisal that meets Department of General Services requirements, related legal fees for acquisition and land transfer, and continued team planning meetings and land visits.

The project also includes activities involved in the transfer of the property from SFI to the Council, including but not limited to developing and finalizing a land donation agreement in collaboration with the Council and related team meetings and legal fees. After acquiring the property, the Council intends to designate the property as a Tribal Protected Area, ensuring lasting ecological protection and supporting the Council's re-establishment of cultural stewardship on behalf of its ten member Tribes.

The Council's designation of a Tribal Protected Area confers recognition that the property is situated within the Sinkyone Tribal Territory; that the property for millennia has been a place of importance for the Sinkyone People who lived upon it; and that the property holds great cultural and ecological significance for the future tribal owner and its tribal constituency. The property's Tribal Protected Area designation will constitute the future tribal owner's commitment to respect, safeguard and tend the property and its inherent cultural, spiritual, ecological, and natural attributes and values in a manner that fosters and promotes intergenerational protection, diligent care and healing for the property and its species, habitats and ecosystems. Further, the property's Tribal Protected Area designation recognizes the future tribal owner's inherited cultural responsibility to maintain and revitalize traditional tribal relationships with respect to the land, air, water, spirits, and native flora and fauna of the Property. The Tribal Protected Area designation will memorialize tribal commitments, safeguard the property's biological and cultural values for future generations, and help ensure ecosystem recovery and revitalization.

The Council will assume long-term management responsibilities, developing a stewardship plan grounded in indigenous land care principles and practices, and reflecting the needs and interests of its member tribes. The Council's care and protection of the property and its waterways will be based on tribal traditional values and the mandate to protect and revitalize cultural lifeways, consistent with the inherent rights, consent, and protection of nature. The project includes the development of initial stewardship planning, which may include a draft concept plan for limited public access, future priorities for land and water protection, restoration needs, stewardship opportunities, cultural evaluation and protection protocols, and an initial framework for culturally informed conservation practices for the property.

The Council will pursue funding for ongoing management and restoration through tribal, state, federal, and philanthropic sources, as it has successfully done for other Tribal Protected Areas in its care. Annual monitoring will be conducted, consistent with the Council's cultural protocols and SFI's standard stewardship protocols. Additionally, SFI and the Council may jointly pursue future grant funding for stewardship and restoration efforts, building on both organizations' successful track records in implementing conservation and habitat protection and enhancement projects.

The project will provide lasting protection for native plants and animals; safeguard critical cold-water sources and flows; revitalize cultural relationships through active tribal stewardship; and enable recovery of biocultural integrity and abundance.

Site Description: The property consists of 255-acres (APN 220-111-005) located in a remote southern sub-basin of the Mattole River watershed near Whitethorn, Humboldt County. The region is steep, heavily forested, and highly erosive. The area was heavily impacted by extensive timber harvest between 1945 and 1970. Since that time, the area has been further impacted by the expansive growth of the cannabis industry, and associated road building and water diversions. The property was previously used as a cannabis grow operation and features two derelict and rotting structures, and various sheds, fences, water tanks, and trash, which will be removed as part of the project.

The property is immediately adjacent to the King Range National Conservation Area—68,000 acres of public land that link to over 150,000 acres of conserved lands in the North Coast region—significantly contributing to the ecological integrity of the area, and offering potential for long-term, culturally-informed environmental protection and stewardship.

The property is situated in the heart of Sinkyone Tribal territory and holds significant biocultural value for the Council and its member Tribes. The site includes approximately one mile of the Ta'che (Mattole River) mainstem, spanning both sides of the river, and 1,500 feet of Nóó-nih Yaash (Bear Cub Creek). These waterways provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened species, and support a rich diversity of native plants and animals.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SFI is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, working for more than 40 years to conserve property and undertake restoration activities in the Mattole River. It has administered several Conservancy and California Department of Fish and Wildlife grants for water conservation and habitat restoration projects in the upper Mattole River. SFI has a strong track record of working with public funding sources, closing acquisitions efficiently, recording transactions with county offices, and maintaining accurate property records.

The Council is an inter-tribal consortium consisting of 10 federally tribe members. The Council, organized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit since 1993, owns and operates over 4,000 acres of land for the purpose of protection and restoration of the coastal forest and marine ecosystems. The Conservancy and the Council have a long-standing working relationship.

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 project will protect 255 acres of riparian and upland habitat to benefit endangered coho salmon, protect an important wildlife corridor adjacent to the 68,000-acre King Range and the approximately 7,700-acre Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, as well as the reintroduction of tribal stewardship to the land and provide the opportunity to develop public access through guided hikes. The acquisition will support 30x30 Goals.

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 is being developed in partnership with the Council and reflects tribal leadership, values, and vision. The Council and SFI have a long-standing and trusted relationship, including SFI’s role in holding a conservation easement on another Council-owned property since 1997. In that project, a 3,844-acre property was acquired with support from the Conservancy and designated as a Tribal Protected Area. SFI maintained ongoing communication with the Council through regular phone calls, emails, and in-person and virtual meetings to ensure close collaboration throughout all stages of project development.

This project supports the return of traditional territorial land to tribal care and will enable long-term biocultural stewardship. The property will be designated as a Tribal Protected Area and managed according to goals and objectives identified by the Council’s leadership. The project prioritizes the protection of historic cultural landscapes and waterways and the restoration of tribal access and stewardship, while ensuring the property is permanently conserved for future generations.

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

The benefits of the project will be sustainable and resilient in perpetuity through permanent legal protections and long-term tribal stewardship. Transferring ownership of the property to the Council will ensure its permanent protection and stewardship through indigenous governance principles rooted in generations of biocultural knowledge, understanding and practice. This stewardship approach is adaptive and responsive to both ecological and cultural needs, increasing the property’s resilience to climate change, habitat degradation, and other environmental pressures.

As part of its standard land stewardship responsibilities, SFI will conduct annual monitoring consistent with the Council’s cultural protocols. The Council will develop a long-range stewardship plan that integrates habitat restoration and cultural revitalization goals and will seek ongoing support from tribal, public, and philanthropic sources to fund these efforts. This partnership model—combining Indigenous leadership, legal conservation tools, and

collaborative restoration planning—ensures that the ecological and cultural benefits of the project will be maintained in perpetuity.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will permanently protect: 1) one mile of the mainstem Ta'che (Mattole River) that provides critical rearing habitat for juvenile coho Salmon, 2) 1,500 ft of Nóó-nih Yaash (Bear Cub) Creek, a vital cold water contributor to Big Finley Creek and the Ta'che (Mattole River) that supports the yellow-legged frog and tailed frog, and 3) refugia for numerous native animal species, including the black bear, cougar, river otter, golden eagle, and osprey. The project advances equity and environmental justice by returning traditional cultural lands to the Council, benefiting its ten member Tribes. It supports Indigenous leadership in conservation and affirms tribal sovereignty and stewardship of culturally significant lands.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy (Prop 68)	\$800,750
California Council of Land Trusts	\$100,000
Decolonizing Wealth Project	\$65,000
Project Total	\$965,750

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/2024 appropriation from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68, Public Resources Code Sections 80000-80173). Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allows funds for “protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources” in accordance with Division 21 and for "protection, restoration, and improvement of coastal forest watersheds" (PRC § 80120(c), (e)). "Protection" includes acquisitions and actions necessary to prevent harm, improve public access, and allow the continued use and enjoyment of property and natural, cultural, and historic resources." This project is consistent with Chapter 9 because it will protect coastal and cultural resources for continued use and potential public access, and will plan for adaptation measures that will enhance, restore, and protect coastal and ocean resources in the Mattole River watershed (PRC Section 80120 (c); PRC § 80002(l)). 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 this staff recommendation.

SFI has secured \$100,000 from the California Council of Land Trusts.

The Council has secured \$65,000 from the Decolonizing Wealth Project.

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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding improving and protecting coastal and marine habitats (Section 31220). As required by Section 31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board for consistency with Public Resources Code Division 20.4, Chapter 3 (the Clean Beaches Program, commencing with Section 30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code, the purpose of which is to fund projects that restore the water quality and environment of coastal waters, estuaries, bays, and nearshore waters.

Section 31220(a) authorizes the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed resources protection projects if the projects meet one or more of the objectives detailed in Section 31220(b).

Consistent with Section 31220(b), the project will achieve the following objectives: protect fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed (Section 31220(b)(2)); reduce unnatural erosion and sedimentation of a coastal watershed (Section 31220 (b)(4)); and acquire coastal wetlands and watershed lands, including watershed lands draining to sensitive coastal or marine areas (Section 31220(b)(6)). The project will acquire property interests that will protect 255 acres of coastal watershed lands containing critical and/or vital habitat for steelhead trout, coho salmon, the marbled murrelet, and northern spotted owl.

Consistent with Section 31220(c), the project will include a monitoring and evaluation component as part of SFI's ongoing land stewardship policies.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

Projects undertaken pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code must be consistent with the following, if available and relevant: Integrated Watershed Management Programs; local watershed management plans; and water quality control plans, adopted by the state and regional water boards.

The proposed project helps implement the following 2007 North Coast Integrated Regional Water Management Plan objectives:

- Objective 1: Conserve and enhance native salmonid populations by protecting and restoring required habitats, water quality, and watershed processes
- Objective 5: Address environmental justice issues as they relate to disadvantaged communities, drinking water quality, and public health

The proposed project will facilitate the planning and implementation of restoration projects to restore aquatic ecosystems and enhance salmonid populations. The proposed project will also address environmental justice issues as they relate to disadvantaged communities and public health by providing resources that improve quality of life and maintain autonomy for disadvantaged tribal communities.

The proposed project is also consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast (adopted by the Regional Water Quality Control Board North Coast Region in 1988 and last

updated in 2018). The Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast designates beneficial uses of inland surface water in the Cape Mendocino Hydrologic Unit, Mattole River Hydrologic Area (Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast, Table 2-1, pp. 2-8 to 2-12). It includes uses of water that support terrestrial ecosystems including wildlife habitat, rare, threatened, and endangered species habitat, migration of aquatic organisms and spawning, reproduction and/or early development. The proposed project will enhance wildlife habitat, habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species, and inland surface waters in the Ta'che (Mattole River).

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.2, Return Power to Tribes**, the proposed project will provide ownership and management responsibility of 255 acres of ancestral land to the Council, a consortium of tribes.

Consistent with **Goal 1.3, Support Meaningful Engagement by Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project supports meaningful engagement by a systemically excluded community including the Council, as described in Selection Criteria 3, above.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1, Conserve Land**, the proposed project will protect 255 acres of land and coastal watershed resources and enhance habitats.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Section 15313 because it involves an acquisition of land to preserve fish and wildlife habitat; and Section 15325 because the project involves the transfer of ownership interests in land to restore natural conditions, including plant or animal habitats and to preserve the existing natural conditions and habitats of the property.

The removal of infrastructure is also categorically exempt from environmental review under CEQA pursuant Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations Title 14 Section 15301. Section 15301 (existing facilities) exempts the operation, repair, maintenance, or minor alterations of existing structures, facilities, or topographical features, involving negligible expansion of existing or former use of the site. Demolition and removal of individual small structures listed in this subsection are: one single-family residence, a duplex or similar multifamily residential structure, a store, motel, office, restaurant, and similar small structure if designed for an occupant load of 30 persons or less. The proposed project is categorically exempt under Section 15301 because it involves the demolition and removal of small existing structures, including cannabis related infrastructure and structures, consistent with the types of structures listed under Section 15301.

Lastly, the land stewardship planning is statutorily and categorically exempt pursuant to the following sections of 14 California Code of Regulations: (1) Section 15262 in that it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded; and (2) Section 15306 in that it involves basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which will not result in any disturbance to an environmental resource, and which will be undertaken as part of a study leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.

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