

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 19, 2026

FOUNDERS GROVE RENEWAL AND RESTORATION PROJECT

25-050-01

Project Manager: Hannah Bartee

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,239,300 to Save the Redwoods League to implement the Founders Grove Renewal and Restoration Project, consisting of restoration of a 0.75-acre old-growth coast redwood grove, building a new mile-long accessible trail and pedestrian bridge, and installation of interpretive and wayfinding signage in the Founders Grove area of Humboldt Redwoods State Park in Humboldt County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Founders Grove Area of Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Humboldt County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Founders Grove Comfort Station Relocation and Replacement Project Initial Study/Negative Declaration](#)

Exhibit 4: [Letters of Support](#)

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 million two hundred thirty-nine thousand three hundred dollars (\$1,239,300) to Save the Redwoods League ("the grantee") to implement the Founders Grove Renewal and Restoration Project, consisting of restoration of a 0.75-acre old-growth coast redwood grove, building a new mile-long accessible trail and pedestrian bridge, and installation of interpretive and wayfinding signage in the Founders Grove area of Humboldt Redwoods State Park in Humboldt County.

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 Proposition 4 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards'.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, this Conservancy resolution is effective only if legislation is enacted that exempts program guidelines and selection criteria for the disbursement of funds from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 ("Proposition 4"), Public Resources Code Sections 90000-95015, from the requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act at Government Code sections 11340-11361.

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. The Save the Redwoods League is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Founders Grove Comfort Station Relocation and Replacement Project Initial Study/Negative Declaration adopted by the California Department of Parks and Recreation on May 15, 2024 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. The Conservancy finds that the Founders Grove Day Use Area Relocation and Reconstruction Project as designed will have no significant effect on the environment.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$1,239,300 to Save the Redwoods League (League) to implement the Founders Grove Renewal and Restoration Project (project),

consisting of restoration of a 0.75-acre old-growth coast redwood grove, building a new mile-long accessible trail and pedestrian bridge, and installation of interpretive and wayfinding signage in the Founders Grove area of Humboldt Redwoods State Park (HRSP) in Humboldt County, enhancing public access, increasing visitor safety, and protecting and improving the health of an old-growth coast redwood grove. See Exhibit 1 for project location maps and Exhibit 2 for photos of the project area. In addition, this project includes installation of new interpretive signs that were designed and fabricated under a previous \$175,000 State Coastal Conservancy Coastal Stories grant, and that retell the story of Founders Grove more accurately, not hiding the challenges of the past and including the history and connection of local Indigenous communities with the area. The California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) is the owner and manager of the project site and has agreed to partner with the League to improve visitor facilities, trails, and interpretive infrastructure at Founders Grove as part of State Parks' larger Founders Grove Comfort Station Relocation and Replacement Project (Comfort Station Relocation). The project is Phase 2 of the Comfort Station Relocation.

State Parks and the League are currently moving into the implementation stage for Phase 1 of the Comfort Station Relocation, work which is being funded separately by the League and other State funding as a capital outlay project. Phase 1 includes building a new parking lot, comfort station, picnic grove and play area, camp host sites, and trailhead. The new parking lot will be located approximately one mile down Dyerville Loop Road from the existing parking lot. With the capacity for roughly 65 vehicles, including ADA stalls and EV charging stations, and more than half a dozen bus and RV stalls, it is a much-needed upgrade. Phase 1 work addresses two key challenges with Founders Grove. The biggest challenge that Phase 1 addresses is the aging and outdated infrastructure at the grove entrance, including an undersized parking lot with only 18 spaces and a crumbling comfort station, insufficient for serving up to hundreds of thousands of visitors annually—HRSP received more than one million visitors in 2023 and Founders Grove is one of the most popular locations in the park. Another challenge is that the existing undersized parking lot forces many visitors to park their vehicles along and then cross Dyerville Loop Road. Phase 1 will tackle these challenges by building a large parking lot, comfort station, and picnic grove and play area. The new parking lot is designed to accommodate all potential visitors, based on a peak season overflow parking assessment and visitor use studies. The new design also keeps everyone on the south side of Dyerville Loop Road, rather than parking visitors on the north side where they have to make a dangerous crossing near the busy entrance, and develops safety features along the road that include signage, boulders, and split-rail fencing to protect the public from the traffic on the road. Phase I planning and construction funding comes from State Parks, which will provide a total of \$3,750,000, and the League, which will provide \$2,500,000.

The project addresses three additional challenges to Founders Grove. The new parking area built under Phase 1 of the larger Comfort Station Relocation project will be nearly a mile from the popular Founders Tree and existing Founders Grove Nature Loop. The project will construct an accessible trail through the redwoods that will allow visitors to safely access the grove and existing loop trail from the new comfort station. The trail will be approximately 1 mile long and construction will include installation of a pedestrian bridge to cross an existing drainage. Once the new parking lot is built, the old-growth coast redwood grove where the existing parking lot

and facilities are located will be in need of restoration, as its health has been negatively impacted by frequent car and pedestrian traffic within the trees' root health zone. The project will remove the existing outdated day use facilities such as the comfort station, picnic tables, and existing interpretive elements. It will also remove the asphalt of the old parking area and revegetate the majority of the area, except for ADA parking spots at its entrance that will continue to provide accessibility to the closest point on the Founders Grove Nature Loop. No additional redwood trees will be planted as restoration will focus on revegetation with understory plantings, mostly with relocated ferns and shrubs, to keep people from entering the area and to return the grove to a healthier state. The total restored area will be approximately 0.75 acres. Finally, the project will install newly-branded wayfinding signage as well as the new interpretive signage developed under the previously awarded Conservancy Coastal Stories Grant, which does not include installation costs. The interpretive exhibits and wayfinding signage will be installed in appropriate locations to protect the old-growth redwood grove, help people access the new trail, and highlight the updated story of Founders Grove.

Founders Grove is an iconic stop and popular day use area for travelers along the Pacific Coast Bike Route/Highway 101 and the Avenue of Giants, and renewal and restoration of the project site will have a significant impact for both local residents and visitors to HRSP. Additionally, the new day use area and terminus of the new Founders Grove Connector Trail will be located across Dyerville Loop Road from the planned Great Redwood Trail and they will become part of a network of trail amenities and connector trails for this flagship Conservancy trail project. As a spur to the Great Redwood Trail, which links to the California Coastal Trail, the construction of the new 1-mile trail will expand the inland network of trails connecting to the California Coastal Trail. The League and State Parks conducted outreach to community members that are historically excluded from decision-making processes and underrepresented in the outdoors, soliciting feedback on potential site usage and storytelling aspects by these communities, as further described in Project Selection Criteria #2 below. Tribal engagement and involvement in the development of the interpretive elements to be installed as part of this project is described under Project Selection Criteria #3 below. This input enriches the understanding of the history of Founders Grove and will be reflected by installing interpretive signage that retells the story more accurately, not hiding the challenges of the past, and more inclusively, prioritizing the history and connection of local California Native American tribal communities with the land.

Site Description:

Founders Grove is located in Humboldt Redwoods State Park (HRSP) just north of the town of Weott and adjacent to Highway 101 and the Avenue of Giants—just south of the South Fork Eel River bridge (see Exhibit 1). It is about 5 miles north of the State Park's visitors center on Dyerville Loop Road and is the largest stand of coast redwoods in HRSP—a highly visited park in California State Park's North Coast Redwoods District. The grove is home to the Founders Tree, which was the world's tallest known tree from 1931-1957, named after the Leagues' Founders who opposed historical logging of the redwoods in the area. Founders Grove is one of the most visited groves in HRSP, yet, despite its popularity, it has significant aging infrastructure, including an often-overflowing parking lot, a crumbling comfort station, and outdated interpretive exhibits and wayfinding signage. The current 0.75-acre parking lot only has capacity

for 18 vehicles with no bus or RV parking; in addition, it is located immediately within an old-growth redwood grove (see Exhibit 2).

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

The League was founded in 1918, and, since that time, the League and its partners have protected over 220,000 acres of redwood forests, created 67 redwood parks and reserves, pioneered science-based restoration work, and connected millions of people to these majestic forests. The League has implemented numerous projects similar in size and scope to this one that prioritize the health of old growth redwoods and public access to the forest like this project does. One example is the Grove of Titans Project, where the League also partnered with State Parks to enhance the visitor experience at the Grove of Titans in Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, including a trail renovation, new elevated walkway, and interpretive exhibits developed in collaboration with the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation. The League has a robust finance, legal, and grants team to manage administration of grant funding. The League has received many State Coastal Conservancy grants over the years, including the \$175,000 Coastal Stories grant awarded in 2023 to support re-telling the story of Founders Grove through the development of updated and inclusive interpretive content and design of signs that will be installed through this Founders Grove Renewal and Restoration Project. State Parks is the landowner, manager in perpetuity, and primary partner in the restoration and renewal of Founders Grove with the League. State Parks will conduct long-term management and maintenance of the project components, including maintenance of interpretation installations, as part of the operation of HRSP.

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 activities will complement other visitor access and experience improvements already planned and moving into implementation by the League and State Parks under the larger Founders Grove Comfort Station Relocation and Replacement Project. With the grantee and its partners already activated in the project area, the project is highly feasible. The project also supports State conservation plans. The project will advance pathway number six of *Pathways to 30x30 California*, "Expand and Accelerate Environmental Restoration and Stewardship," specifically the action to "restore degraded landscapes, waterways, and priority habitats." Redwood forests are identified as a Sensitive Natural Community by California Department of Fish and Wildlife's vegetation classification program and a focal habitat for conservation in the California State Wildlife Action Plan. Additionally, it supports State Parks' HRSP General Plan by supporting its goal to protect the ecological integrity of the Park's coast

redwood forests. The HRSP General Plan calls for identifying developed locations in coast redwood forests most heavily impacted by visitor use and implementing vegetation rehabilitation, including relocation of visitor use areas, which the project does with the grove in the existing parking lot area. The project also advances the HRSP General Plan goal to provide recreational opportunities that allow people to visit and better understand the significance of the redwoods, including providing maximum feasible accessibility to trails and historical resources, through installation of the new trail and interpretive and wayfinding signage.

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 development of the project has been closely aligned with the League's Founders Grove Interpretation Project, which received a Coastal Stories grant to provide a more inclusive and complete story of coast redwood conservation, including telling the story of the tribes and Indigenous communities whose land the grove is on, their relationship to the redwood forest, and their continued stewardship of the land and the surrounding coastal area. To carry out that project, the League partnered with local tribal groups to receive their guidance, knowledge, and content for the development of new interpretive exhibits. Tribal members reviewed all the interpretive documents and helped to develop first-hand content relating to their culture. Once finalized, the resulting interpretive infrastructure will be installed as part of this project. In addition, project partner State Parks maintains ongoing communication with tribal communities. The League and State Parks will continue to engage Indigenous constituencies in the area in finalizing the interpretive signage and on placement of interpretive signage. The League also anticipates continued collaboration with Indigenous communities in post-project visits and educational programming. As part of the larger project to renew and restore Founders Grove, the District intends to rename the park with assistance from local Indigenous constituencies.

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

The project benefits will be sustainable and resilient over the project lifespan in the following ways:

- The project is designed to be resilient to climate change impacts and flooding. The new Founders Grove Connector Trail design accounts for flooding in the project area. The new trail will be elevated above grade to avoid ponding, and adequate drainage is incorporated into the project design.
- The bridge has been designed to last at least 50 years, and it is expected that access to the trail will be sustained in perpetuity, maintaining the benefit of public access to recreational opportunities and the majestic redwoods of Founders Grove.
- The project incorporates permanent wayfinding signage to enhance the long-term safety and protection of visitors. Interpretive panels and wayfinding signs will be located and installed in a manner that keeps them as protected as possible and supports their longevity.

- The removal of the existing parking lot and old comfort station from the old-growth redwood grove and the revegetation of the grove facilitate its long-term health and viability.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

As described above, the project delivers multiple short- and long-term benefits and significant positive impact. The project's outcomes generate co-benefits such as increased public health from enhanced access to recreational opportunities and improved recreational amenities. Another co-benefit is habitat enhancement from the restoration of the old-growth coast redwood grove, which also supports the redwoods' extensive capacity to provide cooling and sequester carbon, which is important for climate change mitigation. The Project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in its Strategic Plan by restoring habitat in, and enhancing public access to, an important State Park area that has connections to the California coastline including as an iconic stop and popular day use area for Californians travelling along the Pacific Coast Bike Route/Highway 101 and the Avenue of Giants. The new day use area and terminus of the Founders Grove Connector Trail will be located across Dyerville Loop Road from the planned Great Redwood Trail and they will become part of a network of trail amenities and connector trails for this flagship Conservancy trail project. In addition to being home to vital coast redwoods and a link in the chain of California Coastal Redwood Parks that stretches from just below California's northern border down to the Big Sur coastline, HRSP is located in the Eel River coastal watershed and contains a portion of the Eel River.

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

During early planning for the larger Founders Grove Comfort Station Relocation and Replacement Project, the League engaged community groups to introduce the project and gather feedback on potential site usage and storytelling aspects by these communities. Community members that are historically excluded from decision-making processes and underrepresented in the outdoors were the focus of outreach (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and People of Color youth and young adults), and community groups that were engaged included Cumbre Humboldt, Umoja Center for Pan African Student Excellence at Cal Poly Humboldt, Ciencia Para Todos, College of the Redwoods Multicultural and Equity Center, Black Humboldt, Humboldt Asians and Pacific Islanders, Centro del Pueblo, and Asian, Desi, and Pacific Islander Collective.

One example of engagement activities conducted during planning is a community walk and luncheon that was hosted by the League and State Parks at the project site in August 2023, where participants from the above groups were invited to learn about plans to renew and restore Founders Grove, provide input on interpretative theme recommendations to improve their visitor experiences, and generate early ideas for post-project partnership programs at Founders Grove. The League also plans to involve these same communities, as well as others, as the project progresses and in post-project visits and educational programming. Since the proposed project improves and expands upon existing amenities at the grove, community engagement in the design process was not as extensive as it would be with the creation of a

new park. Even still, project partner State Parks conducted outreach for this project as is customary for all projects, and community engagement was included in the CEQA process.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,239,300
Project Total	\$1,239,300

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from the Fiscal Year 2025/26 appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (2024 Climate Bond or Proposition 4), codified at Public Resource Code Sections 90000-95015, to the Conservancy for the purpose of coastal resilience. These funds are available as described in Section 92010 of the Public Resource Code, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of Proposition 4 coastal resilience funds. These funds may be used for coastal resilience projects and programs, including, but not limited to, grants and expenditures to protect, restore, and increase the resilience of beaches, bays, coastal dunes, wetlands, coastal forests, watersheds, trails, and public access facilities. “Protection” is defined as “those actions necessary to prevent harm or damage to persons, property, or natural, cultural, and historic resources, actions to improve access to public open-space areas, or actions to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources” (Public Resource Code Section 90100(h)).

The proposed project is consistent with this funding source, because it will prevent harm to natural resources by protecting the health of old-growth coast redwoods. Additionally, it will develop a mile of new accessible trail within a coastal watershed, thereby improving access to a public-open space area and supporting the continued enjoyment of the Founders Grove area of HRSP.

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 project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of Division 21 of the Public Resource Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy has a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Pursuant to Section 31409, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail.

Consistent with these provisions, the recommended grant is to the League to build 1 mile of accessible trail, install a pedestrian bridge and signage to improve visitor access to and experience of Founders Grove. The trail will be a spur to the Great Redwood Trail, which will

connect to the California Coastal Trail, and is thus an expansion of an inland trail system that is linked to the California Coastal Trail. The League is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 510(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. The organization's principal charitable purposes are to focus on protection of old-growth redwoods and public access.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.2 Coastal Stories Program**, the project will enrich the understanding of the history of Founders Grove by installing interpretive signage that retells the story more accurately, not hiding the challenges of the past, and more inclusively, prioritizing the history and connection of local Indigenous communities with the land.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the project includes construction of 1-mile of accessible trail that will be a connector trail to the Pacific Coast Bike Route and will eventually become a connector trail to the Great Redwood Trail, one of the Conservancy's five flagship trails and a direct route to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed project includes installation of approximately 30 wayfinding, educational and interpretive signage, including multi-lingual signage that enable visitors to enjoy natural, cultural, and historical resources.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project includes the removal of a visitor use center, day use area, and parking lot that have adversely impacted an old growth redwood grove and restoration of the removal site to coast redwood forest vegetation.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On May 15, 2024, State Parks adopted the Initial Study and Negative Declaration for Founders Grove Day Use Area Relocation and Reconstruction Project (IS/ND) and approved the Founders Grove Day Use Area Relocation and Reconstruction Project. The proposed project has three elements, which will include the following:

1. Decommissioning and demolishing the existing restroom facility, which is currently out of service, as well as the parking lot at Founders Grove;
2. Relocating and constructing a new day use facility including restrooms and parking in an alternate location. In addition, the new site will include a new water source and treatment system, and on-site sewage disposal system;
3. Constructing a new accessible trail connection to Founders Grove.

State Parks has incorporated a list of Standard and Specific Project Requirements that are included in the project design to ensure that impacts remain less than significant. For this reason, the IS/ND did not identify any potentially significant environmental effects.

Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project will have no significant effect on the environment.

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