

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 23, 2026

**GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL AGENCY OPERATIONS,  
TRAIL DEVELOPMENT, AND RESTORATION**

26-006-01

Project Manager: Hannah Bartee

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$6,000,000 to the Great Redwood Trail Agency for: (1) Great Redwood Trail Agency operations; and (2) trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation in the counties of Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt.

**LOCATION:** Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties

---

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [GRTA Master Plan](#)

Exhibit 3: [February 13, 2025 GRT Augmentation Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 4: [GRTA Resolution 2025-09 Environmental and Tribal Commitments](#)

---

**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 six million dollars (\$6,000,000) to the Great Redwood Trail Agency (“the grantee”) for: (1) Great Redwood Trail Agency operations; and (2) trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation in the counties of Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt (collectively, 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.
4. In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards' and the 'Great Redwood Trail Master Plan'.

Prior to commencement of construction and implementation projects, the grantee shall submit for review and approval evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement these projects have been obtained. Grantee shall not commence any construction or implementation project unless grantee has obtained the Executive Officer's written confirmation that the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act. Any proposed implementation or construction project funded under this grant that is not exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act must first be approved by the Conservancy prior to any implementation or construction. Any proposed construction or implementation project must be included in grantee's annual work program, which must be approved by the Executive Officer's written confirmation.

Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

---

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$6,000,000 grant to the Great Redwood Trail Agency "GRTA") for: (1) Great Redwood Trail Agency operations; and (2) trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation in the counties of Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt. The Great Redwood Trail (GRT) is planned to be developed along the former North Coast Railroad Authority (NCRA) rail right-of-way, and, when completed, would be the longest rail-trail in the nation (Exhibit 1).

GRTA will use the grant funds as directed by the GRTA Board of Directors ("GRTA Board") in accordance with GRTA's adopted annual budget, which will identify the distribution of funds between: (1) operations; and (2) trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation. GRTA's spending will be guided by the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan (Master Plan) (Exhibit 2), which was developed by Conservancy and GRTA staff using prior Conservancy authorizations and adopted by the GRTA Board in March 2026. As the overarching plan for the GRT, the Master Plan provides both general guidance and specific recommendations for the development, operations and maintenance, and governance of the trail. Prior to GRTA's adoption of its annual budget, the Conservancy will review the GRTA's

work program to ensure that all projects proposed for funding are consistent with this authorization.

Previous Conservancy funding authorizations have provided support for GRTA operations and interim staffing. On May 5, 2022, the Conservancy authorized staff to “1) enter into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) with the Great Redwood Trail Authority (GRTA) for the purposes of developing the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan and community engagement process and providing interim staffing and technical support to the GRTA; and 2) spend up to \$3,500,000 of funds appropriated to the Conservancy specifically for the Great Redwood Trail to support the purposes of the JPA for the advancement of the trail in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties.” On February 15, 2024, the Conservancy augmented the funding for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, technical support, and interim staffing support for GRTA. And most recently, on February 13, 2025, the Conservancy authorized additional funding for GRTA operations through an interagency agreement with the County of Sonoma (Exhibit 3). Conservancy staff and the GRTA have made significant progress on the GRT since the Conservancy’s May 2022 authorization. Funding supported technical and legal consultants for the federal railbanking process, and railbanking has been completed for the northernmost segment of the rail line (Willits north to its terminus at Samoa on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay). Work has been initiated on the railbanking of the rail line segment which stretches from Willits southward to the Mendocino-Sonoma County border. Using some of the 2021 appropriated funds that were set aside for Conservancy staff support, Conservancy staff, including two dedicated project managers, have worked to support the ongoing operations of the GRTA, the development and completion of the Master Plan, and trail projects including managing grants for the construction of more than 7 miles of three GRT segments in Ukiah, Willits, and along Humboldt Bay and the planning of over 26 miles of three GRT segments: 1) from Willits to Longvale, 2) near The Wildlands Conservancy’s Eel River Canyon Preserve and Emerald Waters Reserve, and 3) in Alderpoint in unincorporated Humboldt County.

The GRTA staff has grown from the initial, interim staffing support provided by the Conservancy and requires sustained funding to expand agency capacity. In January 2024, an Executive Director for the GRTA was hired and commenced work to lead the agency with direction from the GRTA Board. In November 2024, an Operations Manager for the GRTA was hired and commenced work that includes managing GRTA property to address deferred maintenance, providing oversight for lease and license agreements and the income it generates, and developing new operations and maintenance systems. In October 2025, a Trail Development Manager was hired and commenced work to create systems and internal structures to support the advancement of GRT planning, design, and construction. Since November 2025, GRTA has hired new support staff, including an Administrative Analyst and two Property & Trail Maintenance Technicians. In the next year, GRTA anticipates continued and rapid growth of its internal staff team and network of consultants to increase its capacity to lead and manage trail and restoration activities.

When using Conservancy grant funds for trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation, GRTA will be guided by the Master Plan, which identifies restoration opportunities and prioritizes individual trail segments for development based on project

readiness, feasibility, and community impact. An important part of the master planning process and ongoing development of the GRT is extensive tribal outreach and community engagement as further described in the project selection criteria below. Trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation activities may include, but are not limited to, environmental review and permitting, engineering and design, right-of-way and access improvements, bridge and culvert rehabilitation or replacement, trail surfacing and drainage improvements, habitat restoration associated with trail development, and related pre-construction or construction-phase activities. Implementation funding may also be used to strategically advance GRT segments through early-stage planning, technical studies, environmental clearance, or other preparatory work intended to improve project readiness and enhance competitiveness for future state, federal, or other funding opportunities, including rural or backcountry segments, gap-closure projects, or other segments where targeted investment would meaningfully accelerate delivery timelines or leverage future capital funding. Examples of segments that could potentially be advanced under this framework include, but are not limited to, Tier 1 or Tier 2 segments such as Blue Lake to Glendale (Segment 39) along the GRT Spur: Annie & Mary Trail, or other segments identified by the GRTA Board as priorities through its annual budgeting process.

In accordance with this framework, the GRTA Board will adopt a list of projects under active development as part of its annual fiscal year budget, prior to July 1 each year. Prior to GRTA Board consideration, the GRTA will submit a revised workplan to the Conservancy describing additional projects to be funded under this authorization for the Conservancy's review and approval. Upon adoption of the annual budget, the revised workplan associated with this agreement will be formally amended to reflect the specific allocation of funds to be used for GRTA operations and trail and restoration projects authorized for that fiscal year.

**Site Description:** The GRT is proposed to stretch the length of the former North Coast Railroad Authority's right-of-way from San Francisco Bay more than 300 miles northward to the Humboldt Bay area, including appurtenant railway branches that connect from the rail mainline toward Carlotta near Highway 36, Blue Lake near Highway 299, and Samoa near Highway 255. The Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) District now owns portions of the rail right-of-way in Sonoma and Marin Counties, and will be responsible for planning, constructing, and operating the Southern Segment of the GRT with Larkspur at its southern terminus. The final connection between Larkspur and the Golden Gate Bridge may be planned, constructed, and operated by others.

The Conservancy assisted the GRTA with preparation of the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan for the approximately 231-mile northern portion of the right-of-way owned by GRTA from the Sonoma/Mendocino border, near the community of Hopland, northward through the Cities of Ukiah, Willits, Fortuna, Rio Dell, Eureka, Arcata, and Blue Lake to its terminus on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay. Along the way, the trail will pass through redwood forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and the currently largely inaccessible wild and scenic Eel River Canyon, before skirting the edge of Humboldt Bay. As the right-of-way was formerly used for rail purposes, it consists of a gentle grade with railroad tracks, passing over a number of rail bridges and trestles, and through tunnels, some of which have collapsed. Much of the rail line is in good condition for conversion to trail, but in some areas, erosive geology, deferred

maintenance, and wildlife habitat disrupted by past rail activity create challenges that will need to be addressed through careful planning and implementation.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** GRTA was created by Senate Bill 69 (“The Great Redwood Trail Act”)—introduced by Senator McGuire and signed by Governor Newsom in 2021—as the successor agency to NCRA. In converting the NCRA to the GRTA, the focus of ownership has changed from an agency whose primary mission was to ensure rail service, to an agency that is now charged with developing the rail corridor into a world class trail. The GRTA formally succeeded the NCRA on March 1, 2022 and now controls the rail right-of-way for the section from the Sonoma/Mendocino County line north to Humboldt Bay. Pursuant to SB 69, GRTA has contracted with the Conservancy for interim staffing and support in organizational development. As described in the February 2025 staff recommendation (Exhibit 3), the GRTA has successfully managed past Conservancy funding authorizations for its operations via an interagency agreement for financial services with the County of Sonoma. Through this assistance and strong leadership from GRTA staff and the GRTA Board, the agency has grown and now administers multiple contracts and grants to manage GRTA property and develop the GRT. Recent successes include the removal of more than 200 tons of waste from a GRTA-owned building utilizing funds from a CalRecycle grant, the digitization of GRTA parcel ownership and license agreements through a GIS consultant, and the emergency repair of a failed culvert area and subsequent restoration of fish passage on McNab Creek in Mendocino utilizing local contractors.

**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 grant will advance the planning and construction of the Great Redwood Trail, which will be a world-class, multi-use, rail trail that will provide significant recreational and economic benefits to Californians. The construction of the GRT is feasible, with significant portions already completed. The trail will take advantage of an intact rail right of way for the approximately 231-mile section from the Sonoma/Mendocino County line to the Samoa Peninsula in Humboldt County. The approximately 70-mile Southern Segment of the GRT in Marin and Sonoma Counties is being planned by SMART, in conjunction with its rail operation.

The project will advance the state’s 30x30 Executive Order by facilitating habitat restoration along the GRT alignment. The project will also support the state’s Outdoors for All Initiative, specifically by connecting statewide and regional trail networks to provide diverse experiences (Outdoors for All Strategy 1.7).

**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 proposed grant will fund ongoing work the GRTA has undertaken to conduct intentional, meaningful tribal engagement with the many tribes whose ancestral territory and/or current lands intersect with the proposed trail. The Conservancy and GRTA have offered government to government consultation with and extended the invitation for collaboration and coordination opportunities to all California Native American tribes with ancestral territories and/or current tribal lands that interface with the project area. As part of the GRT Master Plan development process Conservancy and GRTA staff and consultants have hosted a webinar for tribes, presented at tribal council meetings, and held in-depth one-on-one conversations with tribal representatives. Ongoing tribal engagement is a critical priority for GRTA, as reflected in the 13 tribal recommendations in the Master Plan developed from input from California Native American tribes, GRTA's May 2025 letters to tribes inviting tribes to collaboration and coordination opportunities along the trail corridor, and GRTA Resolution 2025-09 Environmental and Tribal Commitments (attached as Exhibit 4).

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

Development of the GRT will be a sustainable and multi-benefit project. The proposed authorization will fund continued organizational development of GRTA and the implementation of recommendations developed in the Master Plan related to staffing, coordination with California Native American tribes, coordination with community stakeholders, emergency responders and other agencies, priority trail segments and restoration opportunities, operations and maintenance of the GRT corridor, and long-term funding strategies. The GRTA and its partners will ensure that the GRT will be maintained long into the future and continue to provide valuable benefits.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The Great Redwood Trail will be a multi-benefit project with significant positive impacts. The proposed trail will be an international tourist destination, providing new public access and a new way to experience California redwoods, North Coast vineyards, the wild and scenic Eel River, and the Humboldt Bay shoreline. Other regional rail-trails have become popular tourist attractions that have provided economic revitalization benefits to communities across the country. The Great Redwood Trail will create recreation opportunities for multi-day adventures as well as more local outings. Around the world, regional rail-trails and long-distance trails are popular tourist destinations, attracting visitors for the unique experience the trails offer. Beyond recreational opportunities, the trail will form the spine of a regional active transportation network, providing safe, non-motorized routes for everyday trips as well as longer journeys. Safety is a core trail benefit—supporting safer travel for users and improving access for emergency response, wildfire management, and long-term stewardship along the corridor. Finally, the trail also supports environmental restoration. By reusing the historic rail corridor, trail development can restore native vegetation, improve habitat connectivity, and help repair areas where ecosystems were previously disrupted, including through actions such as removing fish passage barriers.

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

The proposed grant will support systematic efforts to conduct ongoing meaningful community engagement. Community engagement was a key element to the development of the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan, helping to inform the project goals, trail design elements, amenities, access points, opportunities and constraints, policy considerations, and next steps for the Great Redwood Trail. The outreach program for the Master Plan included presentations at 32 tribal and community events, 6 in-person workshops and 4 online workshops with a total of 725 attendees, over 70 stakeholder meetings, and over 600 public comments and almost 800 public survey responses collected. In person outreach and community meetings were held in cities and communities along the GRT corridor in the counties of Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt. This engagement guided the development of a Master Plan that seeks to prioritize the needs of local communities, diverse trail users and stakeholders. Additional collaboration with California Native American tribes, adjacent landowners, and local agencies and organizations, as well as ongoing engagement with tribal community members and the broader community will continue to be essential to future trail design and construction phases, environmental restoration activities, and GRTA operations.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$6,000,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$6,000,000</b>

The proposed authorization is anticipated to come from a FY 2025/26 appropriation from the General Fund of \$6,000,000 to the Conservancy “for the Great Redwood Trail Agency for general operations and trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation.” (Budget Act of 2025, AB 105) Consistent with the purpose of these funds, this authorization will be encumbered in an agreement with the GRTA for use on: (1) general operations; and (2) trail and restoration planning, design, construction, and implementation.

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) related to a system of public accessways. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The proposed Great Redwood Trail will connect inland populations to the coast and will include segments of the California Coastal Trail. This authorization will fund the work of the GRTA, a public agency, to conduct planning and tribal engagement and community outreach to inform trail development, and to carry out construction of trail and is thus consistent with the purposes of Chapter 9.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:**

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed grant will assist with planning and construction of facilities that will improve recreational conditions and active transportation options within multiple disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities in the counties of Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and construction of the Great Redwood Trail, which is one of five flagship trails identified in the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and construction of facilities that will enhance recreational opportunities, including benches, linear parks, education and interpretive facilities, public art, and signage.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitat**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and implementation of restoration of fish and wildlife habitat, including the reduction of barriers to fish migration.

Consistent with **Goal 4.3 Multi-benefit Nature-Based Climate Adaptation**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and construction of the GRT which will increase community resilience, offering people-powered, non-motorized transportation options that are multi-benefit and integral to nature-based climate adaptation.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The planning portion of the project is exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262 because it involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. The planning portion of the project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306, because it involves only data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to any environmental resource.

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

The other tasks to be funded, such as staffing for GRTA and administrative and organizational development for GRTA, are not a "project" for purposes of CEQA because they entail organizational and administrative activities of government (See 14 CCR Section 15378(b)).

Upon Approval of this grant, the Conservancy will file a Notice of Exemption.

The proposed authorization would fund the above CEQA exempt activities and may also fund construction and implementation of trail and restoration projects in the project area. As described above, the GRTA staff and GRTA Board will work to identify projects for potential funding and will carry out CEQA review before authorizing funding of any project. In light of this process, at the time of this authorization, the Conservancy does not know which construction and implementation projects will be recommended for funding, no particular projects are authorized for funding, and there is not sufficient information to provide meaningful environmental review of projects. Further, the proposed authorization does not foreclose alternatives or mitigation measures for any particular project. Therefore, considering the balancing described in the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, title 14, section 15004, it is appropriate to undertake CEQA compliance at the time projects are identified by the GRTA staff and GRTA Board rather than at the time of this authorization. Accordingly, GRTA will not move forward with any proposed construction or implementation projects funded under this grant unless GRTA has obtained the Executive Officer's written confirmation that the project is exempt from CEQA. Any proposed implementation or construction project funded under this grant that is not exempt from CEQA must first be approved by the Conservancy prior to any implementation or construction.