

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 23, 2026

SHAAHNAA' LHOOK' ACQUISITION

Project No. 25-037-01

Project Manager: Amanda Townsel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to Trust for Public Land to undertake the Shaahnaa' Lhook' Acquisition, consisting of acquiring the 672-acre Shaahnaa' Lhook' property for the preservation of open space; protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and habitat for fish and wildlife; protection of cultural resources; and California Native American tribal access consistent with such purposes; and to develop a management plan, in Branscomb, Mendocino County.

LOCATION: 39850 Wilderness Lodge Road, Branscomb, Mendocino County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

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 million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to Trust for Public Land (the “grantee”) to undertake the Shaahnaa' Lhook' Acquisition, consisting of conducting pre-acquisition activities, and acquiring the 672-acre Shaahnaa' Lhook' property (Mendocino County Assessor Parcel Numbers 013-660-73, 013-660-67, 013-660-65, and 013-660-58) for the preservation of open space; protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and habitat for fish and wildlife; protection of cultural resources; and California Native American tribal access

consistent with such purposes; and to develop a management plan for the property in Branscomb, Mendocino County (the "project").

This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):
 - 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 and the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 as the source of that funding, including by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property or in a nearby publicly-viewable area, the design and location of which are to be approved by the Executive Officer.
2. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the 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.
3. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
4. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for the preservation of open space; protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and habitat for fish and wildlife; protection of cultural resources; and California Native American tribal access for cultural use consistent with such purposes. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
5. Prior to commencement of the management planning tasks, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer the following:
 - a. Evidence that the acquisition is complete.

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 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources projects.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. Trust for Public Land 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 \$1,500,000 to Trust for Public Land (TPL) to undertake the Shaahnaa' Lhook' Acquisition, consisting of acquiring the 672-acre Shaahnaa' Lhook' property for the preservation of open space; protection, restoration, and enhancement of natural resources and habitat for fish and wildlife; protection of cultural resources; and California Native American tribal access consistent with such purposes; and to develop a management plan for the property, in Branscomb, Mendocino County (collectively the "project").

TPL intends to acquire and then transfer the property to the Cahto Tribe of Laytonville Rancheria ("Cahto Tribe") for long term stewardship pursuant consistent with the acquisition purposes. The property shares the name Shaahnaa' Lhook', meaning "creek with salmon", with the creek itself, as it is located at the confluence of Shaahnaa' Lhook' (Dutch Charlie Creek) and the South Fork Eel River, and forms the lower part of the 2,800-acre Shaahnaa' Lhook' watershed. The property is within the Tribe's traditional territory, and its return will restore stewardship of culturally important land and waters to the Tribe. This acquisition will support the Tribe's initiative to establish the Cahto Tribal Protected Area, and restoring cultural stewardship and ecological integrity across the Shaahnaa' Lhook' watershed.

The property contains 1.25 miles of Shaahnaa' Lhook', designated by the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration as a high-priority stream for salmonid recovery because of its high-quality spawning, rearing, and refugia habitat. Surveys by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) extending from 1938 to the present have consistently identified Shaahnaa' Lhook' as a highly productive steelhead stream that provides excellent spawning and rearing habitat, despite the many habitat disturbances that occurred regionally during that period. More recent surveys have also established Shaahnaa' Lhook' as a salmonid stronghold, exhibiting some of the highest coho salmon observations in the South Fork Eel River basin.

Protecting habitat within the property is important for salmonid recovery, ecosystem health, and the cultural survival of the Cahto people, whose lifeways and food sovereignty depend on the annual return of salmon.

This project will take place in two phases, beginning with pre-acquisition activities overseen by TPL, including legal and title due diligence, appraisals, and environmental assessments. The next phase will include closing escrow on acquisition by TPL and then activities involved in the transfer of the property from TPL to the Tribe. The Tribe will manage the property consistent with the acquisition purposes in perpetuity as a Cahto Tribal Protected Area, guided by its elected Executive Committee, Environmental Protection Department, Land Management Department, and advisors.

Once the property has been acquired by TPL, the Tribe will develop a management plan to restore salmon habitats, prevent sedimentation, and enhance the watershed's ecological integrity guided by traditional ecological knowledge and western conservation science. Management activities in the plan may include active monitoring of water quality and instream habitat, erosion control to reduce sediment loads, and preservation of forest canopy to stabilize hydrology and mitigate climate risks, including drought and wildfire. Beyond ecological restoration, the project will enable future cultural and educational programming, creating opportunities for Tribal youth, food sovereignty initiatives, and workforce development in stewardship and conservation practices.

Site Description:

The property, located at 39850 Wilderness Lodge Road, is made up of four parcels, Assessor Parcel Numbers 013-660-73, 013-660-67, 013-660-65, and 013-660-58, in Branscomb, Mendocino County. The property has frontage on the paved segment of Wilderness Lodge Road and has power and phone to the site, multiple unpermitted structures, and substantial water resources.

Shaahnaa' Lhook' is a tributary to the South Fork Eel River and consists of 4.2 stream miles, 3.5 of which are accessible to anadromous fish. Despite the historical logging of the property and the larger Shaahnaa' Lhook' watershed, Shaahnaa' Lhook' remains a critically important stronghold for salmonid recovery in the South Fork Eel drainage and in California more broadly. It contains high quality spawning, rearing and refugia habitat for salmonid species including state and federally threatened Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast coho salmon, federally threatened northern California winter-run steelhead Evolutionarily Significant Unit (ESU), and federally threatened California coastal chinook salmon ESU. The property also has 0.2 miles of frontage along the South Fork Eel River and borders 0.25 miles of Thompson Creek, a cold-water tributary to Shaahnaa' Lhook'.

The property garners high rankings in biodiversity and climate metrics: The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Lands study identifies the property and its surroundings as part of a climate resilient and well-connected landscape. In CDFW's Areas of Conservation Emphasis studies the property garnered the following rankings (scale of 1 - 5): 5 for Aquatic Irreplaceability; 5 for Aquatic Rare Species Richness; and 4 for Statewide Rare Species Richness.

In addition to salmonids, a variety of other special-status species may occur on the property. CDFW California Natural Diversity Database listing for the property's U.S. Geological Survey Quad indicates 35 special-status species have been found within the vicinity, including birds such as northern spotted owl, American goshawk, multiple bat species, amphibians, including the northern red-legged frog, as well as numerous species of plants.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: TPL is a national land conservation organization with a mission centered on creating land for people. TPL has an extensive track record of completing complex, multifaceted conservation projects, including tribal land return, establishing public lands at local and national scales, and creating preserves in partnership with non-profit organizations. TPL and the Conservancy worked together in 1986 to establish the Sinkyone Wilderness, an early project that transferred 3,900 acres to the Intertribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council for ownership and stewardship. Between 2022 and May 2025, TPL completed 23 land protection projects encompassing over 44,000 acres in California, with a combined fair market value exceeding \$250 million. Since 2011, TPL has successfully managed over \$25 million in grants from the State Coastal Conservancy, demonstrating its capacity to deliver large-scale conservation initiatives.

The Cahto Tribe of the Laytonville Rancheria is a federally recognized tribe that has stewarded their ancestral territory since time immemorial, as well as their current 202-acre Rancheria just west of Laytonville. Through its Environmental and Land Management Departments, the Tribe has demonstrated strong capacity in natural resource management, integrating traditional ecological knowledge with contemporary conservation science to improve water quality, restore habitats, and enhance climate resilience. The Tribe operates comprehensive monitoring programs, implements restoration practices, and manages forest health to support biodiversity and fire resilience. With established interagency and nonprofit partnerships, skilled staff, and cultural expertise, the Cahto Tribe is well-positioned to lead large-scale conservation initiatives that protect ecological integrity while revitalizing cultural lifeways.

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 permanently protect 672 acres of culturally and ecologically significant land and waterways within the Shaahnaa’ Lhook’ watershed to benefit threatened salmonids, enhance connectivity with 32,000 acres of adjacent conservation lands, preserve the natural viewshed of the federally and state-designated Wild and Scenic South Fork Eel River, and restore tribal stewardship to the land.

The project advances key regional and statewide plans, including Pathways to 30x30, the California Water Action Plan, the California Salmon Strategy for a Hotter, Drier Future, and the Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon, aligning with state priorities for conservation, climate adaptation, and equity.

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 with the project area.

The property is located within the ancestral territory of the Cahto people, and the project is being developed in partnership with the Cahto Tribe. Securing the property under Tribal ownership will align stewardship with the Cahto Tribe’s long-standing cultural responsibilities and traditional ecological knowledge, ensuring continuity of care across generations. The acquisition will support traditional resource gathering, intergenerational learning, and the reestablishment of land-based practices, while also providing a foundation for cultural and educational programming, food sovereignty initiatives, and workforce development in conservation and stewardship.

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

The Cahto Tribe will steward the property in perpetuity consistent with the acquisition purposes, protecting and enhancing its bio-cultural values and natural resources by applying traditional ecological knowledge alongside contemporary restoration practices to maintain salmon habitats, forests, and water resources. The Cahto Tribe passed a resolution that affirms their commitment to prohibit commercial extractive uses, implement a culturally informed approach for the recovery of coho salmon and other key species, and address critical climate, wildlife, and conservation challenges in the region. The property will also serve as a foundation for youth education, food sovereignty programs, and cultural initiatives, including teaching

traditional resource gathering and land skills, fostering arts, and creating career opportunities in forest and salmon stewardship.

Stewardship activities will include protecting salmonid habitat, managing forest canopy for water quality, carbon storage, and fire resilience, and monitoring watershed health to adapt to emerging climate challenges. Long-term funding for these efforts is anticipated through a combination of state grants and philanthropy, supported by ongoing partnerships with TPL and other technical and scientific collaborators. The permanent protection of Shaahnaa' Lhook' ensures that salmonid streams and forests remain intact and resilient against logging and subdivision pressures, securing ecological integrity and cultural lifeways for generations to come.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Project benefits include permanent protection of culturally and ecologically significant lands; enables the potential for future restoration of salmonid habitat and enhancement of biodiversity; and improved water quality through Tribally led management of forests and riparian areas. The project returns ancestral land to Tribal stewardship, restoring sovereignty and access, supporting traditional resource gathering and intergenerational learning, and advancing food sovereignty and workforce development.

The Cahto Tribe identified this property as a strategic priority to restore cultural stewardship, protect biodiversity, and prevent environmental degradation in a community already experiencing high unemployment and environmental burdens. This project 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. Without permanent protection, both the ecological integrity and cultural values of the property are at risk of degradation and loss.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,500,000
California Department of Fish and Wildlife Office of Spill Prevention and Response Environmental Enhancement Fund	\$765,000
Project Total	\$2,265,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from the fiscal year 2025/2026 appropriation to the Conservancy 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. These funds are available as described in Section 92010 of the Public Resource Code, which allows the State Coastal Conservancy to provide grants for coastal resilience projects and programs to protect, restore, and increase the resilience of

beaches, bays, coastal dunes, wetlands, coastal forests, watersheds, trails, and public access facilities. Section 92010 specifically allows funds to be allocated for “[p]rojects to protect coastal lands and restore habitats, including subtidal habitats, wetlands, riparian areas, redwood forests, grasslands, oak woodlands, and other important wildlife habitats, including projects to protect and restore healthy sea otter populations” (Section 92010 (a)(2)).

Consistent with this section, the project will permanently protect the lower portion of the Shaahnaa' Lhook' watershed, including 1.25 miles Shaahnaa' Lhook', a critically important stronghold for salmonid recovery in the South Fork Eel drainage and in California more broadly. The project will develop a management plan that will include restoration of important wildlife habitats to assist in the recovery of threatened and endangered salmonids. Stewardship by the Cahto Tribe will also include managing forest canopy for water quality, carbon storage, and fire resilience, and monitoring watershed health to adapt to emerging climate challenges

In accordance with Section 90050, which requires agencies to prioritize “projects that leverage private, federal, or local funding or produce the greatest public benefit,” this project will permanently protect natural and cultural resources, including essential habitat for federally threatened salmonid populations. Protection of Shaahnaa' Lhook', a critical stronghold for salmonid recovery, is necessary to support population resilience under pressures in the region from timber harvest, climate change, and development.

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).

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

Consistent with Section 31220(b), the project will achieve the following objectives:

- 31220(b)(2) Protects or restores fish and wildlife habitat within coastal and marine waters and coastal watersheds.
- 31220(b)(3) Reduces threats to coastal and marine fish and wildlife.
- 31220(b)(6) Acquires, protects, and restores coastal wetlands, riparian areas, floodplains, and other sensitive watershed lands, including watershed lands draining to sensitive coastal or marine areas.

As required by Section 31220(a), the Conservancy has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board to ensure consistency with Section 30915 of Chapter 3 of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code regarding the Clean Beaches Program. Section 31220(c) requires projects funded pursuant to the section to have a monitoring component and be consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan, if applicable. Consistent with this section, the project is consistent with the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast Region as described in the Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan section below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the project is in, and will benefit, a Severely Disadvantaged Community as identified using the California Proposition 4 Disadvantaged Community and Severely Disadvantaged Community class map and as defined in Public Resource Code Section 90100. Additionally, consistent with Section 90100, the Cahto Tribe, a federally recognized tribe, is a Vulnerable Community.

Consistent with **Goal 1.2 Return Power to Tribes**, the project will restore tribal sovereignty and access by returning Shaahnaa' Lhook' to Cahto stewardship, strengthening ancestral ties and reestablishing cultural responsibilities over the Shaahnaa' Lhook' watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the project will permanently protect 672 acres of culturally and ecologically important forests, waterways, natural resources, and wildlife habitats. The project will protect biological diversity and improve water quality by enabling the future restoration of critical salmon habitats and preserving forests and vegetated riparian areas along identified important salmonid streams.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the project will develop culturally informed management practices to restore and enhance salmon habitats, forests, and water resources, fire-adapted ecosystems, and the watershed's ecological integrity.

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 Goal:

Goals 3: Ecosystem Conservation and Enhancement

- Objective 6 - Conserve, enhance, and restore watersheds and aquatic ecosystems, including functions, habitats, and elements that support biological diversity
- Objective 7 - Enhance salmonid populations by conserving, enhancing, and restoring required habitats and watershed processes

Acquiring the property will facilitate the planning and implementation of restoration projects to restore aquatic ecosystems and enhance salmonid populations.

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) in that it will enhance wildlife habitat, habitat for rare, threatened and endangered species, and spawning, reproduction and/or early development of habitat in the Eel River.

The Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast designates wildlife habitat, rare, threatened, and endangered species habitat, and spawning, reproduction and/or early development habitat as beneficial uses of the Eel River Hydrologic Unit (Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast, Table 2-1, pp. 2-8 to 2-12).

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed acquisition 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 development of the management plan 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.