

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 5, 2008

GUALALA BLUFF TRAIL OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

File No. 08-047-01
Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Consideration and possible Conservancy authorization to disburse up to \$24,000 to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy to operate and maintain public access improvements along the Gualala Bluff segment of the California Coastal Trail in Gualala, Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Gualala, Mendocino County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS:

Exhibit 1: [Location Map: Mendocino Coastline](#)

Exhibit 2: [Gualala Bluff Coastal Trail Markers Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Gualala Bluff Volunteers and Features of the Trail](#)

Exhibit 4: [Letters of Support](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed twenty-four thousand dollars (\$24,000) to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy to operate and maintain public access improvements along the Gualala Bluff segment of the California Coastal Trail, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of funds, the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project, and plans for signs acknowledging Conservancy funding.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to the coast.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
3. Redwood Coast Land Conservancy is a private nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service Code and its purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
4. The proposed project serves greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to twenty-four thousand dollars (\$24,000) to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (“RCLC”) to operate and maintain public access improvements along the Gualala Bluff segment of the California Coastal Trail in Gualala, Mendocino County.

The proposed project will enable the RCLC to maintain and operate access improvements previously constructed with Conservancy funds on the bluff in the town of Gualala. The project will support the maintenance of the Bluff Trail by funding vegetation management, shale distribution and project management for other volunteer assisted maintenance efforts including signing this section of the California Coastal Trail (Exhibits 2 and 3). Heavy lifting of shale and onerous tasks like hauling weeds to the dump are beyond what the majority of volunteers are comfortable doing and the proposed project will help the RCLC meet this need. The RCLC has worked flexibly and resourcefully to complete landscaping improvements and trail maintenance in spite of challenges to use of the trail easement, including a new retaining wall project proposed for the Bluff Trail easement behind the Surf Supermarket. The Conservancy’s Coastal Access Account has the specific purpose of supporting trail operations and maintenance and the proposed project will assist the RCLC’s efforts to manage the trail, coordinate volunteers and complete needed maintenance. The Bluff Trail sees daily use as it offers town visitors a place to view the ocean from a footpath with multiple benches at scenic overlooks of the ocean, the Gualala River and the sand beach surrounding the mouth of the estuary. Located just behind a number of visitor serving shops, restaurants and hotels, the Bluff Trail has engendered much attention and support from tourists and local residents.

The RCLC works to preserve the natural environment and sustainable land use of coastal watersheds from the Navarro to the Russian Rivers, to provide public access to scenic land, and to educate the public regarding the value of the area’s natural heritage for the

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public and future generations. In addition to its previous work on the Gualala Bluff Trail, the volunteer-run nonprofit organization has successfully completed two acquisitions to create the Hearn Gulch Headlands beach and bluff with Conservancy support.

Project History: In October 1994, the RCLC accepted three offers-to-dedicate public access easements (OTDs) over the Gualala Bluff Trail corridor, and stated its intent to develop the trail to give the public access to the scenic beauty of the Gualala River estuary, native flora, bird watching, whale watching, and views of the Pacific Ocean, and to provide a safe alternative for walking between businesses in the commercial district of Gualala.

The OTDs include two 25-foot-wide adjacent lateral easements extending from residential property just north of the Sea Cliff Motel in downtown Gualala and ending at the Ocean Song Restaurant at the south of town. The RCLC also accepted a five-foot-wide vertical access easement across the Surf Motel property from Highway 1 to the mean high tide line. In June 1997 and August 2003, the Conservancy authorized funds to assist the RCLC in constructing the Gualala Bluff Trail on the OTDs. The RCLC has successfully completed construction of a pedestrian bridge, viewing benches and landscaping along the majority of the Bluff Trail lateral easements (Exhibit 3), apart from one section behind the Surf Market where a failed retaining wall is being resolved with the land owner, the Coastal Commission and the County of Mendocino.

The RCLC is also implementing trail improvements at the Hearn Gulch Headlands and access improvements at Bournes Landing and St. Orres Creek in addition to the Gualala Bluff Trail project; each of the accessways are links in the Mendocino County’s segment of the California Coastal Trail.

Site Description: The Gualala Bluff Trail is located in downtown Gualala on a bluff behind a main tourist serving development of shops, restaurants and small coastal hotels. The Bluff Trail consists of a 25-foot-wide access easement that runs from the Surf Motel to the north, along the bluff behind a number of businesses, to the Breakers Inn and Ocean Song Restaurant to the south. The Bluff Trail provides unobstructed bluff-top views of the ocean, the Gualala River estuary and sand beaches of Gualala Regional Park. The proposed project will support the RCLC’s volunteer efforts to operate and maintain this well-used access in downtown Gualala.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 24,000
Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (In-Kind)	<u>\$ 4,736</u>
Total Project Cost	\$ 28,736

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy’s FY2005/06 appropriation from the Coastal Access Account in the Coastal Conservancy Fund. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 30620(c)(2), these funds are appropriated to the Conservancy “. . . for grants to public agencies and nonprofit

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organizations for the development, maintenance and operation of new or existing facilities that provide public access to the shoreline . . . “. The proposed project will operate and maintain coastal access consistent with the purposes of these funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Gualala Bluff Trail Access Operations and Maintenance project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Section 31400) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public access ways to and along the state's coastline.

Under Section 31400, the Legislature has charged the Conservancy with a principal role in the implementation of a system of accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project will operate and maintain a bluff top trail constructed with Conservancy funds.

Pursuant to Section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to any nonprofit organization to develop lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. The proposed authorization will enable the RCLC, a nonprofit organization, to operate and maintain trail improvements along the coastal bluff in downtown Gualala and is consistent with this section.

Pursuant to Section 31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. The proposed authorization will enable the RCLC to maintain and improve access at the Gualala Bluff Trail.

Section 31408 charges the Conservancy, in consultation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, and the California Coastal Commission, with coordination of the development of the Coastal Trail. The proposed authorization will enable the RCLC to operate and maintain a section of the California Coastal Trail, consistent with this section.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS & OBJECTIVES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan as it supports the following Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1 – Objective B, D: Develop the Coastal Trail and related recreational opportunities. The proposed project is consistent with Objective 1B, sign of up to 300 miles of Coastal Trail, in that the project will sign the Coastal Trail at the Gualala Bluff Top Trail. The project is consistent with Objective 1D, construction of approximately 93 miles of trail in public and private ownership, in that the project will support operations of a section of the California Coastal Trail constructed by a volunteer-run nonprofit

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organization with Conservancy support.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines updated in September 2007, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** See Letters of Support in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone, in the town of Gualala on the Mendocino Coast.
5. **Need:** The RCLC is a volunteer run nonprofit currently implementing the Hearn Gulch Access Improvement project and the Gualala Access Revision project as well as stewarding the access improvements developed at the Bluff Trail. The proposed project will further the Conservancy's completion of the California Coastal Trail by supporting the RCLC's efforts to operate and maintain public access at the Bluff Trail while the organization is also completing Coastal Trail segments at multiple locations on the Mendocino coast.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will improve trail access in the coastal community of Gualala adjacent to visitor serving businesses along Highway 1. Travelers, both international and regional, are drawn to the entire north coast of California, particularly those areas within a few hours drive of San Francisco.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The RCLC is working with volunteers to complete stewardship at the Gualala Bluff Trail while also completing improvements at Hearn Gulch, St. Orres and Bournes Landing. This small volunteer-run nonprofit is working at a level where operations and maintenance support is a necessity to maintain improvements in Gualala.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will enhance operations and improve access along a stretch of the California Coastal Trail and also provide support to the RCLC for enhancement of native vegetation at the scenic access

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destination.

9. **Leverage:** The RCLC will leverage Conservancy funding with in-kind contributions of volunteers to complete the proposed project.
10. **Readiness:** The RCLC is prepared to immediately enhance the operations and maintenance of the Gualala Bluff Trail.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** The RCLC is working with the Conservancy and coordinating with local volunteers and agencies to complete improvements for public access in Gualala, at Hearn Gulch and St. Orres Creek in the Gualala area.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Gualala Bluff Trail is located within coastal zone and is subject to the jurisdiction of the County of Mendocino’s Local Coastal Program. The proposed project is consistent with the public access and resource protection policies of the Local Coastal Program as described below.

Consistent with LCP policy 3.1-7, the proposed project will operate and enhance access improvements to avoid impacts to Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHAs). The County defines ESHAs as, “Any area in which plant or animal life or their habitats are either rare or especially valuable because of their special nature or role in an ecosystem and which could be easily disturbed or degraded by human activities and developments” (Mendocino County LCP, page 38).

Consistent with LCP policy 3.5, the proposed project will be visually compatible with the character of the surrounding area and subordinate to the natural setting by keeping signs low and doing minimal changes to the trails on the property.

Consistent with LCP policy 3.6-26, The RCLC has provided a Gualala Bluff Trail Management Plan for the management of public access at the bluff in Gualala.

Consistent with LCP policy 3.6-6, the RCLC is providing coastal views from the bluff to minimize impacts on marine resources at other destinations in Mendocino and to provide options to the public to prevent overcrowding on any single area.

Consistent with LCP policy 3.6 on access standards, RCLC will maintain the accessway, provide appropriate warning signs and provide access for people with disabilities where possible.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

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The proposed operations and maintenance activities, including weed removal, new planting, replacement of shale, installation of Coastal Trail signs and other trail maintenance work, consist of minor improvements to existing facilities which will not expand the existing use, and are thus categorically exempt pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15301.

Staff will file a notice of exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.