

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
June 5, 2008

TOLOWA COAST ACCESS AND HABITAT RESTORATION PLANS

File No. 07-104-01
Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$164,000 to Smith River Alliance Inc., to work in coordination with Tolowa Dunes Stewards, and to complete pre-restoration surveys and project permitting for dune restoration in Tolowa Dunes State Park and Lake Earl Wildlife Area, and to develop a coastal access strategy for Tolowa Dunes, Lake Earl Wilderness Area, and Point Saint George in Del Norte County.

LOCATION: Tolowa Dunes State Park, Lake Earl Wildlife Area, and Point Saint George, in Del Norte County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access and Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Aerial Map of Tolowa Dunes to Point St. George Area](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Tolowa Dunes State Parks Restoration Project Map](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Lake Earl Wildlife Area Vegetation Map](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Letters of Support](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31253, 31400-31410 and 31111 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$164,000 (one hundred sixty-four thousand dollars) to Smith River Alliance Inc. to work in coordination with Tolowa Dunes Stewards to complete pre-restoration surveys and project permitting for dune restoration in Tolowa Dunes State Park and Lake Earl Wildlife Area, and to develop a coastal access strategy for Tolowa Dunes, Lake Earl Wilderness Area and Point Saint George, in Del Norte County. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, the Smith River Alliance, Inc. shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget and the names and qualifications of any contractors it intends to employ for the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“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 Chapters 6 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources, and implementation of a system of accessways along the coast.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.
4. Smith River Alliance, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) organization, with a mission consistent with the purposes and objectives of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization of \$164,000 will enable Smith River Alliance Inc. (“SRA”) to work in coordination with Tolowa Dunes Stewards on two projects to: 1) complete habitat and archaeological surveys and permitting for dune restoration in Tolowa Dunes State Park and the Department of Fish and Game’s (“DFG”) Lake Earl Wildlife Area, and 2) develop a coastal access strategy for Tolowa Dunes, Lake Earl Wilderness Area, and Point Saint George in Del Norte County (the “project area”) (Exhibit 2).

The proposed project will increase public access and resource protection for the natural, cultural and recreational values of the project area, and leverage grants the SRA has already secured from the Coastal Commission’s Whale Tail program (CCWT) and the National Parks Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) for these goals.

Dune Restoration

The proposed authorization will enable SRA to work with DFG and the California Department of Parks and Recreation (“DPR”) to complete archaeological surveys, prepare environmental documentation and obtain permits for future restoration activities on 186-acres of coastal dune habitat on DFG property surrounding the breach site of Lake Tolowa and adjacent DPR property at Tolowa Dunes State Park (“TDSP”) (Exhibits 3 and 4). This dune area is infested with an introduced species, European beach grass, *Ammophila arenaria* (“ammophila”), which negatively impacts the native dune ecosystem by suffocating native dune plants. Removal of the invasive ammophila will benefit the unique California populations of threatened silvery phacelia, *Phacelia argentea*, other native dune plants, animals, and the endangered Oregon Silverspot Butterfly.

The proposed authorization will provide funding for environmental review and necessary archaeological surveys pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”), and will facilitate application for a Coastal Development Permit for dune restoration on DFG and DPR property. DPR anticipates receiving \$1.5 million in grants for mechanized dune restoration work in TDSP in 2008-2009. DFG will be actively seeking additional funding for similar enhancement work on their bordering dune property at Lake Earl Wildlife Area (“LEWA”). The

SRA will coordinate with DPR and DFG on the future restoration work to provide volunteer support for hand-pulling of ammophila in the most sensitive project areas where mechanical removal of the invasive species is not possible. The restoration work may be implemented in phases with funding from the Conservancy, DFG and other sources. The Coastal Development Permit for the entire dune restoration area is anticipated to last for five years and the CEQA review may be effective for the next ten years which will allow for restoration in phases as funding can be secured for the entire 186 acres.

Coastal Access Strategy

The proposed authorization will enable SRA to develop a coastal access strategy. The project area spans 12 miles of coastline, over 30 miles of largely unnamed trails, and 11,000 acres of State and locally protected public land, however, the area is now underutilized due to the lack of a comprehensive map and little public awareness of access opportunities and resource protection needs. The proposed project will produce an access enhancement strategy, a comprehensive trail and access map and a website promoting the project area as a visitor destination. SRA will hold a series of meetings, coordinated with RTCA, to gather input on access enhancement from public agency staff and community leaders. The access strategy will also include a proposal for coordinated signage and interpretation for Native American cultural resources such as the Yontucket village and the Point Saint George (“PSG”) Historical District, maritime history of the 1800s Brother Jonathan shipwreck and the St. George Reef Light Station, and the California Coastal National Monument which exists along the Project Area shoreline.

The access strategy will include recommendations for future trail and access improvements at LEWA and PSG, and emergency improvements at TDSP which may be implemented with Conservancy support in a Phase II project. DPR’s participation in the development of the access strategy will ensure a final document that can be used to support emergency improvements for health, sanitation or resource protection in TDSP prior to a future General Plan process; the Redwood State and National Parks has prioritized TDSP for the development of a General Plan but may not be able to initiate the planning process for the park until 2011 due to funding constraints. The need for a comprehensive trail map, emergency improvements and an interpretive signage may be addressed in the interim period leading up to a full General Plan being developed by DPR.

The Smith River Alliance, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the mission of providing for the long-term protection, restoration, and stewardship of natural resources in the Smith River watershed. SRA has successfully conducted habitat restoration and conservation projects with Conservancy support, including the Mill Creek Implementation project. SRA will coordinate on the proposed project with the Tolowa Dunes Stewards (“TDS”), a volunteer-based community group dedicated to stewardship, research and education, protection and restoration of the unique coastal wildlands and wetlands of the Lake Earl coastal lagoon and Smith River estuary ecosystems, including ancient Tolowa Indian village sites. Since its inception in 2005, TDS has engaged over 1,000 participants in interpretive programs and recreational field trips including bird watching, kayaking, plant and bird survey, trail maintenance, trash clean-up and dune restoration events in cooperation with CSP, DFG and the North Coast Redwoods Interpretive Association.

Site Description:

Del Norte is California's northern most coastal county and a gateway to the state. The population center of the county, Crescent City, is located just 20 miles south of the Oregon border and offers the largest harbor between Coos Bay and Humboldt Bay. The proposed project area incorporates 11,000 acres of contiguous publicly protected property stretching from the County-owned Point Saint George to the mouth of the Smith River along 12 miles of ocean shoreline including DFG's Lake Earl Wilderness Area and California State Parks' Tolowa Dunes State Park. All of the project area lies within the coastal zone. The recreational opportunities of the proposed project area are extensive and the greater Crescent City area as a whole attracts visitors to the wild and scenic designated Smith River, the Redwoods State and National Parks system and the local charm of attractions like the Trees of Mystery, the annual Aleutian Goose Festival and, in 2007, Crescent City's first Tall Ships event.

The natural resources found in the project area include a fantastic diversity of plants and wildlife within coastal dune, estuary, wetland, riparian and coastal bluff ecosystems. Two major north/south biological zones overlap the region and provide conditions supporting 21 species of fish, 75 species of mammals and 500 species of flowering plants, including an astounding 325 types of mushroom and fungi. Lake Earl and Lake Tolowa form the largest coastal lagoon system in the western United States. The Lake Earl estuary is a designated Audubon Important Bird Area on the Pacific Flyway and supports a remarkable 300 species of birds. Over 100 species of birds have also been sighted at Point Saint George. Of note, the area's diversity includes 41 federal and/or state endangered, threatened and sensitive marine and land species including the Bald Eagle, Brow Pelican, Peregrine Falcon, Snowy Plover, Stellar's Sea Lion, Red Legged Frog, Oregon Silverspot Butterfly, the Rocky Coast Snail, Tide Water Goby, Western lily, the rare Wolf's evening primrose, Blue-headed Gilia, Marsh Pea, Artic Starflower, and the endemic Silvery Phacelia.

The project area also encompasses a wealth of historical, geological, archaeological and cultural resources. The St. George Reef Light Station is visible on a rocky outcrop six miles offshore where it was constructed in 1892, and the Bureau of Land Management's California Coastal National Monument along the coast includes Castle Rock which is the largest coastal island north of the Farralone Islands. Point Saint George is recognized as one of the oldest sites of prehistoric habitation in the northwest and was designated a National Historic District in 1976. Field surveys and radiocarbon dating of artifacts indicate that PSG has been a place of habitation as early as 310 B.C., and large shell middens characterize high points on the bluffs overlooking the ocean on this windswept coastal terrace. TDSP is also home to eight major Tolowa village sites estimated to be over 3,000 years old. The proposed project would develop an access strategy including coordinated interpretive signage to protect and educate about these resources.

Project History:

In 2002, the Conservancy provided funds to the County of Del Norte for the acquisition of the 339-acre Point Saint George property for the protection of the cultural and natural resources of the site and its public access potential including two miles of the California Coastal Trail. As a condition of the acquisition, the County and a Point Saint George Steering Committee conducted a public process and produced the Point Saint George Management Plan (2004). In 2005, the Conservancy funded the Phase I Implementation project to complete the initial recommendations from the plan, including construction of a guardrail to stop off-highway vehicle damage, improvement of existing parking, plans for future bathroom and parking improvements and

development of a cultural resources management plan with recommendations for resource protection and cultural resource interpretation. The proposed project will support the Phase I Implementation project and coordinate efforts to provide access further north, through TDSP and LEWA.

Recognizing the significance of the biological resources of Lake Earl and Tolowa Dunes, the California Coastal Commission designated this area as one of the most important wetland complexes and as a key conservation area for the state. The area has been an acquisition priority for DFG since 1975 and since that time 10,000 acres of this coastal area have been purchased by DFG and DPR. The Conservancy has supported the acquisition of lands along the east shore of Lake Earl, and had provided funding to SRA to undertake feasibility and preacquisition work for properties within the 1535-lot subdivision of Pacific Shores for protection of habitat in this area.

In 2007, SRA and TDS approached the Conservancy to discuss the need for coordinated efforts across TDSP, LEWA and PSG for habitat restoration and public access. Staff has worked with SRA and TDS to develop the proposed project. Staffs from the National Park Service RTCA program, DPR and DFG, as well as representatives from Del Norte County, Smith River Rancheria and Elk Valley Rancheria have been consulted in the development of the proposed project (*See* letters of support, Exhibit 5).

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$164,000
NPS Rivers, Trails, Conservation Assistance Program	\$66,000
Coastal Commission Whale Tail Program	\$12,000
Smith River Rancheria (In-kind)	\$ 8,000
Tolowa Dunes Stewards and other agencies (In-kind)	<u>\$ 60,216</u>
Total Project Cost	\$ 310,216

Conservancy funds for the access components of the project are expected to be derived from the FY05/06 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (“Proposition 12”) for development projects north of the Gualala River, Pub. Res. Code § 5096.352(c)(2). Consistent with the purposes of these funds, the SRA would use the Conservancy grant for planning of coastal access in Del Norte County within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction.

Conservancy funds for the restoration components of the project are anticipated to be derived from the Conservancy’s FY07/08 allocation of Proposition 12 for resource enhancement projects north of the Gualala River, Pub. Res. Code § 5096.352(d). Consistent with this section, these funds may be used for the rehabilitation, restoration, enhancement and protection of real property or other actions that benefit fish and wildlife.

Conservancy funds for the project will leverage grants SRA has already secured from the Coastal Commission’s Whale Tail program (CCWT) and the National Parks Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapters 6 (enhancement) and 9 (public access) and Section 31111 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

Pursuant to Section 31111, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to undertake plans and feasibility studies.

Under Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources which, because of human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. The proposed project is consistent with this section in that SRA is a nonprofit organization that will work in coordination with TDS to undertake necessary activities including survey, design and permitting for future dune restoration in coastal Del Norte County where prior land use introduced invasive species now threatening native dune habitat and resulting in loss of natural and scenic values.

As required in Section 31252, the proposed project is identified in the Del Norte County Local Coastal Program as requiring public action, as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

Under Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. Consistent with this section, the proposed authorization provides approximately half of the financial resources for the project with a match of in-kind contributions provided by California Department of Fish and Game and California State Parks and grants secured by TDS from the Coastal Commission and the National Parks Service. The proposed contribution by the Conservancy was determined based on application of priority criteria and after taking into account other available resources and the matching contributions to the project by other funding sources.

Section 31400 of the Public Resources Code states the legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project will support the development of a plan to improve public access throughout the project area, thus furthering the purposes of Section 31400.

Under Section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to a nonprofit organization to develop, operate or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coastline. Section 31400.3 enables the Conservancy to provide assistance to nonprofit organizations and public agencies in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. Under Section 31409, the Conservancy may also award grants and provide assistance to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will enable SRA and TDS to develop a comprehensive strategy for public access linking existing public lands and development of the Coastal Trail, which will improve public access to coastal resources in Del Norte County that serve the needs of the local community as well as visitors from outside the region.

Under Section 31400.2 the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by a nonprofit organization. The Conservancy's contribution

to the project has been determined in consideration of the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, an evaluation of project eligibility and priority to effectively meet the provisions of the division, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects.

Consistent with Section 31408(a), the Conservancy consults with DPR and California Department of Transportation to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support efforts to obtain consensus and refine the alignment of the Coastal Trail working with local stakeholders and public agencies for the TDSP, LEWA and PSG project area.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan placement of Coastal Trail signs within existing trails within TDSP and LEWA and PSG, where possible.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support the plans for regional trails along rivers and creeks to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities north of Crescent City in the 11,000-acre project planning area.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support efforts to develop accessways to beach and coastal areas that are currently inaccessible or closed to public use by working with local stakeholders to promote public awareness of and access to trails and resources in TDSP, LEWA and PSG.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will complete environmental documentation and develop permits for future restoration of 186 acres of coastal dune habitat for control of invasive species working with local public agencies in TDSP and LEWA.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 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:** The proposed project is supported by elected officials including Congressman Mike Thompson, Assemblywoman Patty Berg and the Del Norte County

Board of Supervisors, in addition to DPR, DFG, Smith River Rancheria and Elk Valley Rancheria. See Letters of Support (Exhibit 5).

4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Del Norte County.
5. **Need:** The proposed project would address the need for a strategy for coastal access and recreation while also strengthening volunteer stewardship of resources which would not occur without support from the Conservancy.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The tremendous biological diversity and expanse of coast for recreation in the proposed project area are of interest to regional visitors from California and Oregon in addition to the local community and those visiting from abroad.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** There is a clear threat to the biodiversity in Tolowa Dunes as invasive ammophila overtakes native silvery phacelia and other native vegetation, and must be addressed quickly and effectively. Concern for protecting Native American cultural resources is also a pressing issue which needs be addressed.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will promote public access and also complete pre-restoration permit and survey work to support stewardship and dune habitat restoration sites.
9. **Leverage:** Project partners will provide approximately 47% of the total project cost. See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Conflict resolution:** The proposed project will engage multiple interested groups in a process for identifying and mapping existing trails and appropriate places for a range of recreational activities, while also protecting resources and strengthening stewardship opportunities for the Tolowa Coast area.
11. **Innovation:** The proposed project will complete permitting and environmental review for future dune restoration on 186-acres. The proposed project will also complete a strategy to promote and improve coastal access and information sharing via web and print media for an 11,000-acre region of State Parks, DFG and County public property.
12. **Readiness:** The SRA has strong working relationships with public agency landowners and is ready to move forward to complete planning, permitting and environmental review of the proposed projects.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Project History” above.
14. **Cooperation:** SRA and TDS have planned the proposed project with the support of representatives from the local Native American tribes, DPR, DFG, and Del Norte County.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the relevant sections of the Coastal Element of the Del Norte County General Plan, which is part of Del Norte County’s Local Coastal Program (“LCP”). The LCP was certified by the Coastal Commission on October 12, 1983.

The LCP identifies the estuaries of Lake Earl and Lake Tolowa, the wetlands of Lake Earl

slough, sea cliffs and bluffs from Point Saint George into Crescent City, and coastal sand dunes from Point St. George to the Smith River as principal areas of sensitive coastal habitat (LCP, Section IV. Sensitive Coastal Habitat, p. 49). Consistent with the LCP policies concerning the management of coastal dune habitat, the proposed project will conduct pre-restoration survey and permitting for future removal of invasive species at Tolowa Dunes State Park and Lake Earl Wildlife Area (LCP, Section VI. G. Coastal Sand Dunes, p. 70).

The proposed project will also enhance recreational use of the coastal zone recreation area by providing an accurate map of trails and public access features in the project area consistent with LCP, Section III. A. Public Access, (LCP, p. 14). The proposed project will promote coastal and estuarine access by planning and enhancing public access in balance with public safety and the protection of fragile coastal resources, consistent with LCP, Section III. C. (LCP, p.15).

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The coastal access strategy component of the proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it involves only planning studies, evaluation and permitting for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded. It is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, in that it consists of data collection, research, and resource evaluation, which will not result in serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed permitting and environmental review work for future dune restoration will consist of data collection and analysis, planning and permitting and is also categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15306.

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