

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 27, 2021

USAL-SHADY DELL CALIFORNIA COASTAL TRAIL EXTENSION

Project No. 10-030-05
Project Manager: Lisa Ames

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$413,000 to Save the Redwoods League to construct approximately 4.5 miles of new trails extending the coastal trail on the Shady Dell property near the Usal Beach area of the southern Lost Coast in Mendocino County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Adjacent to and south of Usal Beach, Northern Mendocino County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
Exhibit 3: [Shady Dell Trail Initial Study/Negative Declaration](#)
Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
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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 four hundred thirteen thousand dollars (\$413,000) to Save the Redwoods League (“the grantee”) to construct approximately 4.5 miles of new public access trails on the Shady Dell property near the Usal Beach area of the southern Lost Coast in Mendocino County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.

4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. In addition, to the extent appropriate, Save the Redwoods League shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development".

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 and Guidelines.
3. Save the Redwoods League is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently considered the "Negative Declaration for the Shady Dell Trail Construction Project" adopted by Mendocino County on October 22, 2020 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act and attached as Exhibit 3 to the accompanying staff recommendation, and finds that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$413,000 to Save the Redwoods League (SRL) to construct approximately 4.5 miles of new trails on the Shady Dell property near the Usal Beach area of the southern Lost Coast in Mendocino County (see Exhibit 1). The proposed new trails will comprise the ½ mile Shady Dell Creek Trail and the approximately 3.95-mile Ridgetop Trail, both connecting to the existing Peter Douglas Coastal Trail. The proposed trail additions will expand the range of possibilities for hikers of various experience levels to enjoy the California Coastal Trail on the property.

The Peter Douglas Coastal Trail at SRL's Shady Dell property in Mendocino County is the southern extent of the Lost Coast Trail. It is located adjacent to Sinkyone Wilderness State Park and Usal Beach. The 957-acre Shady Dell property contains a variety of highly valuable habitats, including one mile of coastline with sandy beach and steep coastal bluffs, as well as riparian and early-to mid-successional redwood and Douglas fir mixed-forested landscapes (see Exhibit 2). These habitats host several sensitive plant and animal species including an old forest lichen, the Northern Spotted Owl and Chinook and coho salmon. Usal Beach is a popular destination for locals and visitors alike and is the only part of the southern Lost Coast that is accessible to the public by vehicle. Due to its reputation as a world class destination, interest in and visitation to

Shady Dell and the Sinkyone Wilderness State Park is steadily increasing. Over the last year, despite its remote location, annual use of the Peter Douglas Trail has doubled since its opening in May 2016. The pedestrian counter installed at the trailhead logged over 700 hikers each month in summer 2020. This is a significant increase compared to the previous summers where the highest single monthly visitation averaged 400 people.

The Conservancy helped SRL acquire the Usal-Shady Dell Creek property in 2011. With additional Conservancy funding, SRL subsequently planned for and completed construction in 2016 of the 2.3-mile Peter Douglas Coastal Trail (see Exhibit 2). Dedicated to the former executive director of the California Coastal Commission, the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail winds through old growth redwood trees shaped like candelabras, crosses Shady Dell Creek and provides views of the Pacific Ocean. In 2019, the Conservancy funded SRL to plan for a 3.95-mile Ridge Trail connection to the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail with the goal to create a spectacular 6.25-mile loop through the forest with glimpses of the ocean and the coastal mountain range breaking through the trees. In addition, SRL planned for a ½ mile Shady Dell Creek Trail along the creek to offer hikers access to large fire-scarred redwoods and a less strenuous climb to the unique Candelabra grove on the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail. The proposed project will implement the completed plan for these two trails.

Site Description: Save the Redwood League’s Shady Dell property is adjacent to the 7,800-acre Sinkyone Wilderness State Park to the north and the 49,500-acre Redwood Forest Foundation property to the east, which is conserved by a working forest easement. Also, to the north is the Sinkyone Intertribal Wilderness Council land, which connects to the 60,000-acre King Range National Conservation Area, managed by the Bureau of Land Management. To the south are lands managed by Soper-Wheeler, a private timber company.

The 957-acre Shady Dell property contains a variety of highly valuable habitats, including one mile of coastline with sandy beach and steep coastal bluffs, as well as riparian and forested habitat types (see Exhibit 2). The coastal bluff scrub provides habitat for as many as five sensitive plant species, including Mendocino Coast Indian Paintbrush. Records from the California Natural Diversity Database indicate several occurrences of an old forest lichen named “Methuselah’s beard lichen” (*Usnea Longissima*) on the property, indicating a complex forest structure. The property also offers habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl. Early to mid-successional redwood and Douglas fir mixed forest surrounds Shady Dell Creek, a tributary of Usal Creek, which supports habitat for Chinook salmon, coho salmon and steelhead trout.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: SRL’s history of conservation work in the area dates to 1922 with acquisitions on the eastern edge of the Usal Forest Conservation Project. In addition to helping to acquire the Shady Dell property, the Conservancy has worked with SRL on numerous north coast acquisition projects over the last two decades, including the 25,000-acre Mill Creek acquisition in Del Norte County, and smaller acquisitions at Humboldt Lagoons State Park and Montgomery Woods State Park in the upper Big River watershed. SRL stepped in to provide interim funding for the Jenner Headlands acquisition and the Stewarts Point Ranch acquisition in Sonoma County when the State funding was frozen in 2009. Most recently, SRL embarked on a large-scale forest recovery project in the Redwood National and State Park in Del Norte and Humboldt counties with Conservancy assistance. SRL has proven its capabilities as a strong

participant in conserving the coast and promoting public access to the state's natural treasures. SRL is a 501(c)(3) organization established to preserve and save portions of the redwood forests for scenic, recreational and wildlife preservation purposes.

SRL will work closely with the Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to implement the project. MLT has a long history of successfully completing public access and land conservation projects throughout Mendocino County. It has opened more than a dozen coastal public access easements on the Mendocino coast. Most recently, MLT constructed a new coastal trail at Pelican Bluffs near Point Arena, opened a new coastal accessway at Newport north of Fort Bragg and constructed a new coastal accessway and parking/picnicking area on the Old Smith Ranch adjacent to the Ten Mile River. In collaboration with SRL, MLT completed the planning, permitting for and construction of the initial 2.3 miles of the Usal-Shady Dell Coastal Trail, subsequently named the Peter Douglas Coastal Trail and the planning, design and permitting for the 4.5 miles of additional trail proposed by this project.

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 October 2, 2014, 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 below.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section below.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** Expanding the existing Usal-Shady Dell Coastal Trail segment by 4.5 miles into a larger and more complex system of trails with greater public access along the rugged Mendocino Coast will promote and implement the following state plans and policies:
 - *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (Coastal Conservancy 2003), Objective #1, which calls for providing a continuous trail as close to the ocean as possible; Objective #4, which seeks to assure that the location and design of the California Coastal Trail is consistent with the policies of the Coastal Act and Local Coastal Programs; and Objective #5, to design the California Coastal Trail to provide a valuable experience for the user by protecting the natural environment and cultural resources while providing public access to beaches, scenic vistas, wildlife viewing areas and other points of interest.
 - *Coastal Act (1976)*, Public Resources Code Sections 30210 and 30214 on public access and recreation that call for "maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse."

- *The Mendocino County Local Coastal Plan (1991)* supports the development of public access trails along the coast and bluffs that are shielded from the noise and sight of the highway. Specifically, Policy 4.1-10 states, “coastal trails shall be established for hiking... along the Briceland Road and Usal Creek and aligned with other trail segments to the south.” This project will expand existing trails to improve upon those goals.
 - *California Coastal Sediment Management Master Plan*, Goals 2 and 3 are to “sustain recreation and tourism,” and “enhance public safety and access.” The proposed trail expansion was designed to include precautions to prevent erosion damage and preserve soil structure on steep slopes, improving public use of the new trails.
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by CA State Parks, InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, Humboldt Redwoods Interpretive Association, MendoParks, Coast Walk, Visit Mendocino, Assembly member Jim Wood, and Congressman Jared Huffman (see Exhibit 4).
 5. **Location:** See the “Project Summary”.
 6. **Need:** SRL would continue to seek public and private funding for this project, however given the minimal state funding for public access and infrastructure projects this year, it is unlikely the project would proceed without the Conservancy’s support.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Recreationally, the Lost Coast is famous as a destination for hikers, backpackers and campers. The King Range National Conservation Area recently started requiring permits to limit visitor use in backcountry areas. According to the BLM, visitor use has increased over 150% since 2006. The southern Lost Coast trail does not require any permits and will likely experience increased visitation by those who could not get a permit for the King Range. An expanded trail system at Shady Dell will be able to accommodate increased trail use and disperse hikers for a more wilderness experience.
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Vulnerability to sea level rise is minimal on the Shady Dell property. The coastal portion of the property contains steep coastal bluffs that provide stunning views, but no access to the shoreline. The northern access point, where the shoreline is accessible from the Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, could become less accessible with anticipated sea level rise over the next 50-100 years. However, any future trail construction would occur mainly at higher elevations, and thus access to the property would be maintained. The remainder of the property would not be impacted by anticipated sea level rise, and in fact, could provide alternative locations for public access improvements currently located in potentially vulnerable areas on the existing state parks.

Additional Criteria

9. **Readiness:** SRL has completed CEQA analysis and obtained a coastal development permit for the project. SRL completed the planning and construction of the Peter Douglas Trail and the planning, permitting and design for the proposed 4.5-mile extension in a timely manner.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See Project Summary.

11. **Cooperation:** SRL and MLT have been working in collaboration with CA State Parks, InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, MendoParks, and Humboldt Redwoods Interpretive Association as part of the Usal Committee. Together, the committee is working on a joint effort to improve Usal Beach by providing outreach to visitors and educational programs for children, as well as working on restoration projects to remove invasive plants. Many of the children involved in the educational programs come from communities that for generations have been coming to Usal.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Trail maintenance is by nature an adaptive process, requiring ongoing monitoring, and sometimes, adjustments to existing structures to respond to changing terrain, uses, and other factors. Climate change impacts are another factor to consider in the ongoing maintenance of this future trail. The design process took into consideration these potential impacts, to the extent they can be predicted.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** Because the area is characterized by rugged terrain, much of the trail construction will be done using hand tools and chainsaws. In addition, trail crews normally camp on site for the duration of trail building, limiting car trips and thereby minimizing greenhouse gas emissions.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$413,000
Save the Redwoods League	\$106,100
Project Total	\$519,000

The expected source for the Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 ("Proposition 84," Public Resources Code section 75001 *et seq.*) Subsection 75060(b) of the Public Resources Code authorizes the use of these funds for projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project serves to promote access to coastal resources by constructing a new segment of CCT and is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 as explained below. Therefore, it is appropriate to use Proposition 84 funds for the proposed project.

In addition to the \$106,100 cash contribution, Save the Redwoods League will provide project management, the value of which is estimated to be \$12,000 as an in-kind contribution. SRL also expects volunteer trail crew labor (Coastwalk and other organized volunteers) with an estimated value of \$10,000.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 *et seq.*).

Section 31400 states that it is the intent of the Legislature that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline.

Pursuant to section 31400.1, the Conservancy may award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop lands for public access to and along the coast. SRL is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization. The proposed project will develop 4.5 miles of new coastal trail.

Pursuant to section 31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by a nonprofit organization. Consistent with this section, the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy has been determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, as described above.

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 Conservancy's funding will enable SRL to construct public access on the Shady Dell property.

Pursuant to section 31400.8, the Conservancy shall coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail. The proposed project will result in development of 4.5 miles of new coastal trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will construct an approximately 4.5-mile segment of new coastal trail within land held by SRL.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B**, the project will open coastal areas that are currently inaccessible or closed to public use.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective A**, the project will benefit a disadvantaged community.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The County of Mendocino Planning and Building Department prepared an Initial Study/Negative Declaration (ND) as part of its review of SRL's Coastal Development Permit (#CDP_2019_0042) for the project, attached as Exhibit 3 to this staff recommendation. Mendocino County adopted the ND and issued the CDP on October 22, 2020.

The County's environmental review determined that the project impacts will not surpass the threshold of significance for all categories of potential environmental effects.

(The project would have less than significant impacts on Agricultural and Forestry Resources [because it would not require the removal of any living tree species], Biological Resources [the project is conditioned so that no vegetation, detritus, or soils are pushed into the stream or its banking], Geology and Soils [the project will retain vegetation to ensure soil does not erode and use CA State Park Standards for the construction of the trails to ensure best grading practices], and Recreation [the expected additional use of recreational trails is not expected to be substantial.]

Staff has independently evaluated the Initial Study/Negative Declaration of the Coastal Development Permit #CDP_2019_0042 (Shady Dell Trail Construction) adopted by the County of Mendocino on October 22, 2020 and concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment as that term is defined by 14 Cal. Code Regs. §15382.

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