

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 27, 2021

Lone Pine Ranch Acquisition

Project No. 21-006-01
Project Manager: Julia Elkin

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$2,000,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy to acquire approximately 7,480 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and North Fork Eel River in Trinity and Mendocino Counties for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, public access and recreation, open space, and natural resource protection.

LOCATION: Eel River Watershed, Trinity and Mendocino Counties

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Trinity and Mendocino County Assessor Parcel Numbers](#)
Exhibit 3: [Site Photographs](#)
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 two million dollars (\$2,000,000) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) to acquire approximately 7,480 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch Property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and North Fork Eel River in Trinity and Mendocino Counties (Trinity and Mendocino County Assessor Parcels as listed in Exhibit 2 of the accompanying Staff Recommendation) for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat and providing public access and recreation, open space, and natural resource protection subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the grantee shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer):

- a. All relevant acquisition documents 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.
2. The grantee shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
 3. The property acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, providing public access and recreation, and open space and natural resource protection. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged 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.

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 protection.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Wildlands Conservancy 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 \$2,000,000 grant to The Wildlands Conservancy (“Wildlands”) for acquisition of approximately 7,480 acres of the 26,600-acre Lone Pine Ranch Property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and North Fork Eel River in Trinity and Mendocino Counties (see Exhibit 1).

The 196-mile Eel River, designated a National Wild and Scenic River in 1981, is the third largest watershed in California, draining more than 3,500 square miles across five counties. Ninety percent of the land along the Eel River’s mainstem between Cape Horn Dam and the Pacific Ocean is in unprotected, private ownership. Protecting these vulnerable lands and utilizing best practices in land stewardship is needed to help protect the Eel River and the species that rely on its clean water and habitat mosaics to survive.

The Eel River ecosystem supports over 75 mammal species, 400 bird species, and 15 species of fish. This includes salmon and steelhead trout that have seen dramatic population declines as a result of anthropogenic impacts to water quality, overfishing, water diversions, and dams.

Situated on the Mendocino and Trinity County border, the Lone Pine Ranch is a 26,600 acre property located along the eastern bank of the Eel River. Since the 1940s, Lone Pine Ranch has been owned by the Dean Witter Family who primarily used the property for cattle ranching, timber harvesting, and private recreation. The Wildlands Conservancy (“Wildlands”), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is seeking to acquire the entire Lone Pine Ranch property in fee title and operate the property as a protected nature preserve. In October 2019, Wildlands acquired the northwardly adjacent 3,000-acre White Ranch property for \$3,900,000, simultaneously entering into an option agreement for the entire Lone Pine Ranch. This option is set to expire October 18, 2021 with a 30-day closing period.

Acquisition of the Lone Pine Ranch is part of a landscape scale conservation strategy in the Eel River Watershed, complementing conservation land holdings by the Golden State Conservancy at Eel River Ranch and McKee Ridge Ranch and conservation easement acquisitions by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation through the Eel River Peninsula Project upstream of the Lone Pine Ranch. For Wildlands, this acquisition will further their organization’s significant efforts toward the vision of an “Eel River Emerald Necklace”: a system of preserves along the Eel River between Dos Rios and the Pacific that provide for environmental conservation and restoration along with compatible public access (see Exhibit 1). The ranch was also identified in the 2010 California Essential Habitat Connectivity report as a “highly ecologically intact Natural Landscape Block,” i.e. a large, relatively natural habitat block that supports native biodiversity. Acquisition of the property by Wildlands will protect critical landscape linkages for wildlife in the Eel River ecosystem and more broadly across the Northern California Coast Ranges and westward to the Pacific Ocean.

Once acquired, Wildlands will manage Lone Pine Ranch for natural resource conservation and compatible public access and public recreation. Near term conservation will include improvements to sustainable cattle grazing and ensuring timber harvests only occur to improve ecological conditions. Long term conservation efforts under Wildlands’ ownership are anticipated to include invasive species management, wetland and stream restoration, erosion control, improved forest management and native tree plantings. Given that the majority of lands along the Eel River are under private ownership, public recreation opportunities along the Eel River are currently limited. Compatible with its conservation management of the preserve, Wildlands will develop and deliver much needed passive recreation and interpretive education opportunities for the public potentially including new hiking trails, bicycling, horseback riding, camping, and kayak put-ins on the Eel River.

The Eel River and Lone Pine Ranch have tremendous potential for a wide variety of public access and recreation uses. Users floating the Eel River would benefit from improved access and primitive campsites near the river would offer pullouts for rafters and kayakers. Additional public access would be through overnight educational programs, service learning, and team-building opportunities, with a particular emphasis on serving historically underserved, excluded, or underrepresented communities and individuals. At the Lone Pine Ranch, this could include

organized groups from local tribal communities, outdoor education partners like Outward Bound Adventures, and the California Conservation Corps. Local community members from areas like Alderpoint, Covelo, and Garberville would also be welcome to this safe and carefully managed Preserve.

To accomplish this significant fee-title acquisition, Wildlands has divided the full 26,600 acres of Lone Pine Ranch into four strategic funding areas, referred to as Areas One through Four. The 7,480-acre Project Area One, also called “Horse Ranch”, is the subject of this staff recommendation for state funding support (see “Site Description” and “Project Financing”).

The 9,236 -acre Area Two will be acquired by another conservation non-profit using conservation friendly financing, with a five-year contract for Wildlands to secure additional public and/or private funds to acquire fee title to that area. Wildlands will acquire the 9,022-acre Area Three and 863-acre Area Four of the property through philanthropic funding.

Site Description: The Lone Pine Ranch property spans roughly 26,600 contiguous acres south of the town of Alderpoint, in rural northern Mendocino and southern Trinity Counties. The property is currently privately owned by CAB Ranch Company, a Limited Partnership.

The property’s ecological assets include more than 15 miles of the Eel River main stem, 4 miles of the North Fork Eel River, Kekawaka Creek, Willow Creek, Boulder Creek and Wilson Creek. The property’s diverse plant communities include native grasslands, foothill and valley forests and woodlands, chaparral, freshwater wetland, marsh, and riparian habitat, mixed evergreen and montane conifer forests, freshwater creeks, and riverine floodplain. These diverse habitats support numerous species including Pacific fisher, Roosevelt elk, golden eagles, peregrine falcons, northwestern pond turtles, steelhead trout, coho salmon, yellow legged frogs, and southern torrent salamanders.

In addition to its significant natural resource values, ten miles of North Coast Railroad Authority line runs just within the western boundary of Lone Pine Ranch. This defunct rail line is envisioned to become part of the nascent Great Redwood Trail, complementing Wildlands’ commitment to increasing public access opportunities in the Eel River watershed.

This staff recommendation is specifically for acquisition of the approximately 7,480-acre Project Area One, also called “Horse Ranch”, area of Lone Pine Ranch, which constitutes the southernmost reaches of the property. Natural resources in the Horse Ranch area of Lone Pine Ranch include four miles of mainstem Eel River frontage, 4.5 miles of river frontage on the North Fork Eel, and all of the plant communities present across the full 26,600-acre ranch property.

Developed resources on the 7,480 acre “Area One: Horse Ranch” area presented in this staff recommendation include two residences and a bunk house, as well as a variety of barns and ranch structures. These improvements have wood frame construction with painted wood siding and metal roof cover. The structures have been adequately maintained over the years and are in usable condition. Wildlands intends to use the residential structures to house staff for management, maintenance, and security of the property and potentially Lone Pine Ranch as a

whole. The footprint of the improved area, including residential, horse, ranch structures, and horse pastures is approximately 35 acres. Wildlands does not intent to change the existing footprint of the developed portion of the property. The Horse Ranch complex can be accessed off the main County road via a gate that exists on project Area Two and serves as the main point of entry for the property. At the time of the acquisition, Area Two will also close escrow and the buyer will provide Wildlands with an access easement to ensure legal access through Area Two for the benefit of the Horse Ranch (Area One). Obtaining the access easement will be a condition of closing the transaction for Area One.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The Wildlands Conservancy (“TWC”) is a California private nonprofit public benefit corporation dedicated to preserving biodiversity and to providing passive recreation and education opportunities for free to the general public. Over the past twenty-five years, TWC has established the largest nonprofit nature preserve system in California, comprised of fifteen preserves encompassing 143,000 acres of diverse mountain, valley, desert, river, and oceanfront landscapes. These preserves are open to the public free of charge for passive recreation, including camping, hiking, horseback riding, picnicking, birding, and more. In addition, TWC has preserved more than 800,000 acres of land with private funds.

Wildlands has demonstrated experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the State Coastal Conservancy for acquisitions including the Estero Americano Coast Preserve and Santa Margarita River Trails Preserve, and for public access improvements at the Jenner Headlands Preserve.

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:** The proposed acquisition is consistent with the recommendations and policies of the following state plans:

CA Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan (July 2014) – The proposed project is consistent with recommendations in this plan related to forestry and water, in that it will lead to increased forest resilience, protect water resources for an important ecosystem and lead to rehabilitation of a watershed area.

California Water Action Plan, 2016 Update (California Natural Resources Agency, California Department of Agriculture, California Environmental Protection Agency)– Action 4 of this plan is to “protect and restore important ecosystems (restore coastal

watersheds and strategic coastal estuaries to restore ecological health and nature system connectivity to benefit local water systems and help defend against sea level rise, eliminate barriers to fish migration).” The proposed protects a significant area within the Eel River ecosystem from future degradation.

California Wildlife Action Plan – The proposed project is supported by Statewide Conservation Strategy D of this plan: “the state should partner with ... land trusts and conservancies to prioritize and secure through purchase...important habitat linkages.” Consistent with this recommendation the proposed project will support the recovery of several federally-listed endangered species, including furthering the goals of the federal Recovery Plans for the Southern Oregon Northern California Coast (SONCC) Coho.

California Department of Fish and Game’s 2004 Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon acknowledges multiple hydrological areas within the Middle/Upper and North Fork Eel River as Recovery Units for the Southern Oregon Northern California Coast (SONCC) Coho.

4. **Support of the public:** This project is supported by numerous State agencies, public officials, non-government organizations, and private organizations and individuals, including State Senator Mike McGuire, Friends of the Eel River, Resources Legacy Fund, Trust for Public Land, California Wilderness Coalition, and The Great Redwood Trail Alliance (See Exhibit 4).
5. **Location:** See the “Project Summary”.
6. **Need:** The acquisition will not be able to occur without Conservancy participation.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Lone Pine Ranch hosts numerous species listed as species of greatest conservation need per the California State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). These include: Southern torrent salamander, Foothill yellow-legged frog, Northwestern pond turtle, Northern red legged frog, Pacific tailed frog, Northern goshawk, White tailed kite, American Peregrine falcon, Long-eared owl, Flammulated owl, Northern spotted owl, Yellow warbler, Tri-colored Blackbird, Purple martin, Townsend’s big-eared bat, Long-eared myotis, Fringed myotis, long-legged myotis, North American beaver, Ringtail, Pacific marten, Fisher, Roosevelt elk, Northern CA Coast Summer-run, Northern CA Steelhead Trout, Coho Salmon, and Chinook Salmon. Conservation of these species’ habitats serves a greater-than-local interest.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Lone Pine Ranch is located on the mainstem and North Fork of the Eel River, over 26 miles inland from the coast. As such, it is not vulnerable to sea level rise scenarios for the years 2050 and 2100.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The purchase option held by Wildlands for this property expires on October 18, 2021, creating urgency to complete this acquisition.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section below.

11. **Readiness:** Upon receipt of grant funds from the Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board, Wildlands is prepared to pay all closing costs and begin managing the property.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See Project Summary.”
13. **Cooperation:** Wildlands will consult with acquisition funding partners and the local communities when developing the preserve management plan for the ranch. Under Wildlands’s ownership, Lone Pine Ranch will provide free camping and additional recreational opportunities that will connect from the Great Redwood Trail, representing a significant private/public partnership.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The Lone Pine Ranch will provide benefits to fish and wildlife in the face of a changing climate. Enhancing the land’s carbon sequestration by promoting natural carbon uptake will help buffer some of the worst effects of climate change. Conservation management of the Lone Pine Ranch will also create a more climate resilient landscape along the Eel River by protecting critical landscape connectivity and habitat mosaics for a variety of species across a range of elevational gradients, from 360 feet above mean sea level at the Eel River frontage to 4,156 feet above mean sea level at Horse Peak.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The coniferous forests and associated hardwoods on the Lone Pine Ranch contain 100 million board feet of lumber, estimated to have over 29,200,000 pounds of sequestered carbon. Under Wildlands management, timber harvesting on the ranch will only occur to improve ecological conditions, leaving the forest intact to continue sinking carbon out of the atmosphere. In addition, Wildlands will have the opportunity to design and implement tree planting projects to increase the property’s capacity to sink carbon.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,000,000
Wildlife Conservation Board (pending)	\$4,900,000
Project Total	\$6,900,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990 (Proposition 117, Fish and Game Code Sections 2780—2799.6), known as the Habitat Conservation Fund. Consistent with the Habitat Conservation Fund, under State Fish and Game Code Section 2786(e), funds for this project will be used for the acquisition of aquatic habitat for salmonid resources, and consistent with Section 2786(f), funds for this project will be used for the acquisition of critical habitat linkages. Use of Habitat Conservation Funds toward this project is also consistent with Section 2799.5 of the State Fish and Game Code, which states “reasonable public access must be provided except where it may interfere with habitat protection”, as one of the project purposes is public access.

The Wildlife Conservation Board expects to consider its funding toward the project at its August 2021 Board meeting.

Wildlands is contributing approximately \$645,000 in direct expenses and in-kind services to this acquisition. To date, direct expenses incurred by Wildlands for the acquisition in terms of due diligence and tours have included roughly \$100,000 and securing the two-year option agreement for Lone Pine Ranch, valued at \$500,000¹. Indirect expenses of staff time contributions are estimated at \$45,000.

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) permits the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed resources protection projects, if the projects meet one or more of the objectives detailed in Section 31220(b). Pursuant to Section 31220(b)(2), the Conservancy is authorized to undertake a project or award a grant for a project that protects fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed. In addition, Section 31220(b)(8) allows for projects that provide public access compatible with resource protection objectives. The Lone Pine Ranch project will acquire and protect 7,480 acres of coastal watershed lands containing critical mountain lion, deer, coho salmon and steelhead trout habitat.

As required by Section 31220(c), the project includes a monitoring and evaluation component. Monitoring will include documenting the presence of wildlife and special status animal and plant species that utilize and occupy the property, and monitoring of damage or the threat of damage to natural resources, damaged property, poaching, or any other observations of the preserve rules being breached or any unsafe situations.

As required by Section 31220(c), the project is consistent with the local watershed management plan and complied with the requirement to coordinate with State Water Resources Control Board under the Clean Beaches Program. See "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan" section, below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective 5A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect a significant watershed resource property, acquiring approximately 7,480 acres of mostly open space to be preserved for wildlife habitat and public recreation.

¹ This option agreement valuation by The Wildlands Conservancy is based on an estimated value of 1% annually of the Purchase Price of \$25,000,000, or \$250,000 per year for the two-year option period.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective 5C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will preserve a critical fish and wildlife corridor. By securing conservation of the property, this preserve will provide natural resource protection and wildlife connectivity between the adjacent open space properties as well as contribute to the larger landscape level efforts to conserve Eel River resources.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective 6D** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will help preserve a coastal watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective 6A** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project prioritizes a project that benefits disadvantaged communities. These benefits arise both from the property's location within an economically disadvantaged community.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The proposed project is consistent with the Eel River Watershed Management Plan Section 2.5. The project would specifically further the Plan's Water Quality Goal 1: "Protect and enhance the salmonid resources (COLD) and Goal 2: "Protect other surface water uses."

Conservation of this significant property, including riparian, floodplain, and forest restoration will help decrease erosive sediment inputs into the river, as called for by the Plan, resulting in benefits to the Eel River's cold water salmonid fisheries and recreational surface water uses. Consistent with the Eel River Watershed Management Plan's recommendation to "endorse the concept of establishing a "river corridor," Wildlands' approach to this acquisition recognizes and will use public education programs to promote a landscape scale perspective on ecological function and connectivity throughout the Eel River corridor (see Project Summary).

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed funding authorization is categorically exempt from the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations ("CCR") Section 15313 because this project funds the acquisition of land for fish and wildlife habitat. The proposed project is also exempt under Section 15325 because it is an acquisition to preserve and restore the natural habitat of the area.

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