

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 5, 2022

Great Redwood Trail

Project No. 22-009-01

Project Managers: Karyn Gear, Mary Small, & Peter Jarausch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorize the Conservancy to: 1) enter into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) with the Great Redwood Trail Authority (GRTA) for the purposes of developing the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan and community engagement process and providing interim staffing and technical support to the GRTA; and 2) spend up to \$2,500,000 of funds appropriated to the Conservancy specifically for the Great Redwood Trail to support the purposes of the JPA for the advancement of the trail in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties.

LOCATION: Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt Counties

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map & Rail Corridor Photos](#)

Exhibit 2: [Joint Powers Agreement](#)

Exhibit 3: [Great Redwood Trail Feasibility, Governance, and Railbanking Report](#)

Exhibit 4: [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 the Executive Officer to enter into a Joint Powers Agreement with the Great Redwood Trail Agency for the purposes of developing a master plan and community engagement program for the Great Redwood Trail, providing interim staffing services to the Great Redwood Trail Agency, and providing technical assistance to advance the Great Redwood Trail. The Conservancy further authorizes the disbursement of up to two million five hundred thousand dollars (\$2,500,000) for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development,

advancement of the railbanking process, and interim staffing and other services as may be required related to the Great Redwood Trail.

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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the Executive Officer to enter into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) with the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) for the purposes of developing a master plan, conducting community engagement, and undertaking other planning activities to advance the goal of developing the proposed Great Redwood Trail, a trail from San Francisco Bay to Humboldt Bay. Under the JPA, the Conservancy would provide interim staffing services to the Great Redwood Trail Agency and provide technical and other assistance as necessary to advance the Great Redwood Trail (see Exhibit 1: Maps and Exhibit 2: Draft JPA). Staff further recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$2,500,000 of funds appropriated to the Conservancy in the FY 2021/22 budget specifically for the Great Redwood Trail, to be used to advance the purposes of the JPA. The funds will be used for engineering and environmental services, planning and design, public outreach, organizational development, advancement of the railbanking process, interim staffing, and other services as may be required.

The Great Redwood Trail is proposed to be developed along the former North Coast Railroad Authority (NCRA) rail right of way, and, when completed, would be the longest rail trail in the nation. The rail right of way dates back to the late 1800s, when the Northwestern Pacific Railroad constructed the line to carry passengers and redwood logs between Humboldt Bay and San Francisco. Over the ensuing decades, the line changed hands several times, and by the 1980s was struggling and in bankruptcy. To preserve the rail corridor, the State of California created the NCRA in 1989 with the intent of ensuring continued rail service in Northwestern California. Over the next few years, the NCRA purchased the railroad line from Healdsburg in Sonoma County north to Humboldt Bay, and a joint powers authority, the Northwestern Pacific Railroad Authority, purchased the right of way from Healdsburg south to Schellville in Sonoma County and east to Lombard near the Napa River. However, a consistent source of state funds was not provided for investment in infrastructure, and deferred maintenance combined with the unforgiving geology in the Eel River Canyon led to substantial failures along portions of the line. In 1998, the Federal Railroad Administration ordered the entire line closed due to safety concerns. Though the southern portion of the line from Windsor in Sonoma County to Lombard was eventually repaired and reopened for freight service in 2011, no funds were available for

the costly repairs in the Eel River canyon, and no trains have operated north of Windsor since 1998. In all, according to the SB1029 report to the Legislature, \$124 million of state and federal funds were invested in the line between 1990 and 2011 to support freight service, including the costs of purchasing the line, emergency repairs and maintenance, litigation, debt service, environmental remediation, and other expenses. Despite this investment, without ongoing state funding subsidies or a reliable revenue source, the NCRA fell deeply into debt.

As hopes of restoring rail service diminished, support for developing a rail trail project increased. In 2018, legislation introduced by Senator McGuire and signed by Governor Brown (Senate Bill 1029 – the NCRA Closure and Transitions to Trails Act) declared that “the North Coast Rail Authority’s (NCRA) railroad tracks, rights of way (ROW), and other properties provide an opportunity to create a Great Redwood Trail for hiking, biking, and riding, that may be in the public and economic best interests of the north coast.” The legislation sought to assess the feasibility of turning the 316-mile historic corridor into a long-distance recreational trail to be known as the Great Redwood Trail.

Running from the San Francisco Bay through Marin, Sonoma, Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt counties to its terminus on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay, the legacy railway could be used to create a multi-use trail that would serve communities along the North Coast and become a destination trail drawing visitors to northern California. It would traverse the California redwoods, run next to oak woodlands and vineyards of Sonoma and Mendocino counties, wind through the Eel River Canyon next to the designated Wild and Scenic Eel River, and follow the shoreline of Humboldt Bay (Great Redwood Trail Alliance 2020).

With SB 1029 the Legislature called for the preparation of a feasibility study for the Great Redwood Trail. Subsequently California State Parks, working under contract from the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA), prepared a Great Redwood Trail Feasibility Assessment, contained in the Great Redwood Trail Feasibility, Governance, and Railbanking Report (Exhibit 3). The report provided the Legislature an in-depth look at the railroad infrastructure as well as the physical and environmental characteristics of the corridor. The feasibility study found that overall, developing the trail would be challenging and costly, but that much of the line was in good condition for conversion to trail uses. In fact, segments of trail have already been built along the rail corridor– such as portions along Humboldt Bay as part of the Humboldt Bay Trail/Coastal Trail, and other segments in Ukiah and Healdsburg. Other portions are more challenging, particularly the trail alignment through the spectacular wild and scenic Eel River Canyon, due to erosive geology and some failing infrastructure, including tunnels, bridges, and trestles.

After considering the report and reviewing the opportunities and challenges afforded by the rail right of way, the Legislature decided to move forward with the creation of the Great Redwood Trail. Senator McGuire introduced SB 69 (“The Great Redwood Trail Act”) signed by Governor Newsom in 2021, which provides the framework needed to develop the trail. First, the right-of-way was divided on the Mendocino/Sonoma County line. South of Mendocino the rail right of way has been transferred to Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART) which will lead the development of the Great Redwood Trail for Marin and Sonoma Counties as a rail with trail system. Second, to manage and develop the northern section of the trail, SB 69 directed NCRA

to commence efforts to rail bank portions of the rail line to preserve the right of way and enable the development of the trail and established the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) as the successor agency to the NCRA.

The GRTA formally succeeded the NCRA on March 1, 2022. The GRTA now owns the rail right of way for the approximately 252-mile section from the Sonoma/Mendocino County line to its terminus on the Samoa Peninsula in Humboldt County. In converting the NCRA to the GRTA, the focus of ownership has changed, from an agency whose primary mission was to ensure rail service, to an agency that is now charged with developing the rail corridor into a world class trail. SB 69 directs GRTA to, among other things, (1) inventory any parcel, easement, or contract related to its rail rights-of-way, (2) complete an environmental assessment of the conditions of its rail rights-of-way for purposes of trail development, (3) plan, design, construct, operate, and maintain a trail in, or next to, the rail rights-of-way, (4) conduct a robust community engagement process, and (5) pursue a federal railbanking process for the rail rights-of-way.

SB 69 also called for the GRTA to contract with the Conservancy or another agency to provide interim staffing, and, to support this effort, the Legislature appropriated \$10.3 million to the Conservancy in the FY 2021/22 budget. Conservancy staff propose to meet SB 69's requirements by entering into a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) with GRTA. The Joint Exercise of Powers Act allows public entities to enter into agreements to work together to exercise common powers and achieve shared goals—here, development of the Great Redwood Trail. The proposed JPA provides the structure that will enable the Conservancy to assist the GRTA, as intended by the Legislature, by conducting extensive public outreach, developing a trail master plan, and providing interim staffing to the GRTA.

Conservancy staff will work with a consulting firm to develop a comprehensive outreach program and build that feedback into the Master Plan. This is a key element to the development of the Great Redwood Trail as the proposed master planning area spans 3 counties, 6 cities, the ancestral territory of many tribes, and has private property owners on either side of the right-of-way. Staff and consultants will work with these stakeholders to develop recommendations for how to address safety for landowners as well as for trail users. Topics will include how to provide safe road crossings and adequate signage and minimize the risk of wildland fire.

The Master Plan will expand on information gathered in State Park's feasibility study, which provided an initial assessment of the railroad infrastructure and the physical and environmental characteristics of the corridor. The Master Plan will provide policy recommendations to the GRTA and local governments for how best to develop the trail and maintain it in the long-term. Specific issues addressed by the plan will include guiding principles for the trail; status of trail development (drawing from the existing feasibility study); design principles, signage and branding; shared use conditions; trail route; access; safety; cost estimates/budget; project opportunities/project list; future project selection and priorities; and others as determined necessary.

Finally, the Master Plan will provide recommendations for how the right-of-way can be used to promote environmental benefits such as fisheries restoration along the Eel River. Development of the original rail line was done without much attention to its impact on fisheries. Stream

crossings were built that blocked fish passage and sections of the rail line also created additional erosion. There are many opportunities to partner with nonprofit organizations, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and NOAA Fisheries, to identify and support restoration opportunities along the corridor.

The proposed authorization also provides for the Conservancy to provide necessary interim staffing support, including Conservancy employees who will work on developing and managing the planning effort and outside consultants who will provide an interim executive officer and assist with organizational development, developing a financial strategy for the GRTA, administrative support, property management, and railbanking. Staff expects some work will be achieved through contracts with Sonoma County, which currently provides payroll and legal services to the GRTA.

Site Description: The Great Redwood Trail is proposed to stretch the entire length of the former NCRA right of way, from San Francisco Bay 316 miles northward to the Samoa Peninsula on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay. The Marin and Sonoma portions of the rail right of way are now owned by SMART, and SMART will be responsible for planning and developing trail segments in those counties. The Conservancy will assist the GRTA with the master plan for the approximately 252-mile portion of the right of way from the Sonoma/Mendocino border, near the community of Hopland, northward through the Cities of Ukiah, Willits, Fortuna, Rio Dell, Eureka, and Arcata, to its terminus on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay. Along the way the trail will pass through redwood forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and the currently largely inaccessible wild and scenic Eel River Canyon, before skirting the edge of Humboldt Bay. As the right of way was formerly used for rail purposes, it consists of a gentle grade with railroad tracks, passes over a number of rail bridges and trestles, and through tunnels, some of which have collapsed. Much of the rail line is in good condition for conversion to trail, but in some areas erosive geology and deferred maintenance create challenges that will need to be addressed through careful planning.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, 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 Great Redwood Trail is envisioned to be a 320-mile world-class, multi-use, rail trail project connecting California's San Francisco and Humboldt Bays. The trail will take advantage of an

intact rail right of way for the approximately 252-mile section from the Sonoma/Mendocino County line to the Samoa Peninsula in Humboldt County. The approximately 68-mile section in Marin and Sonoma Counties is being planned by SMART, in conjunction with its rail operation. This authorization will develop a master plan for the trail from the Sonoma County line to Humboldt Bay and provide consultant resources to help staff and launch the newly created Great Redwood Trail Agency.

The proposed Great Redwood Trail will repurpose the complete but currently unused rail right of way. After considering the feasibility study the legislature decided to move forward with the creation of the Great Redwood Trail. SB 69 was passed in 2021 and provides the framework needed to develop the trail.

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 to the project area.

The proposed authorization would fund contractors to help the Conservancy conduct intentional, meaningful tribal engagement with the many tribes whose ancestral territory intersects with the proposed trail. This is a critical priority for the development of the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan.

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

Development of the Great Redwood Trail will be a multi-benefit project with significant positive impact as discussed below. The proposed authorization will fund consultant resources to help the newly created Great Redwood Trail Authority to inventory its assets and develop a business plan, budget, and financial strategy for ongoing operation.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The Great Redwood Trail will be a multi-benefit project with significant positive impact. The proposed trail will be an international tourist destination, providing new public access and a new way to experience California redwoods, Mendocino vineyards, the wild and scenic Eel River, and the Humboldt Bay shoreline. The Great Redwood Trail will create new public access to the Eel River Canyon and important natural resources including the Lone Pine Ranch, a property recently acquired by the Wildlands Conservancy with funding from the state. Other regional rail trails have become popular tourist attractions that have provided economic revitalization benefits to communities across America. The Great Redwood Trail will create recreation opportunities for multi-day adventures as well as more local outings. Around the world, regional rail trails and long distance trails are popular tourist destinations, attracting visitors for the unique experience the trails offer.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

The proposed authorization would support a systematic effort to conduct meaningful community engagement in the trail planning. Community engagement is a key element to the development of the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan as the proposed trail spans three counties, six cities, the ancestral territory of many tribes, and has private property owners on either side of the right-of-way. At this time there has been limited direct community

engagement around the Great Redwood Trail, though Senator McGuire has held multiple well-attended town halls to discuss the Great Redwood Trail.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$2,500,000
Project Total	\$2,500,000

The proposed authorization is derived from a \$10.3 million allocation of General Fund specifically provided to the Conservancy for the Great Redwood Trail. SB 170 (2021) appropriated \$10,300,000 to the Conservancy “for the planning and reuse for assets” of the former North Coast Railroad Authority, including conversion of the Authority’s railroad right of way to a new regional recreation trail known as the Great Redwood Trail. Staff expects to seek Board authorization to spend additional amounts from this appropriation in the future as needed.

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.) related to public access. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The proposed Great Redwood Trail would connect inland populations to the coast and would include segments of the California Coastal Trail. This authorization would allow the Conservancy to work with the GRTA, a public agency, to conduct planning and community engagement to facilitate future development of the Great Redwood Trail and is thus consistent with the purposes of Chapter 9.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective E** of the Conservancy’s 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would fund a master plan for a multi-regional trail and river parkway that connects inland populations to the coast.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project involves feasibility and planning studies, including preparation of the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan, and is therefore statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15262. The project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306, because it involves data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to any environmental resource. Other aspects of the project are not a “project” for purposes of CEQA because they entail organizational and administrative activities of government.

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