

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 14, 2023

**LONE PINE RANCH AREA 3 ACQUISITION -
EEL RIVER CANYON PRESERVE**

Project No. 21-006-02
Project Manager: Peter Jarausch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$3,950,000 to The Wildlands Conservancy to acquire approximately 8,085 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and Kekawaka Creek in Trinity County for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, providing public access and recreation, and protecting open space and natural resources.

LOCATION: Eel River Watershed, Trinity County

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Trinity County Assessor Parcel Numbers](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Photos](#)
- 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 a grant of an amount not to exceed three million nine hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$3,950,000) to The Wildlands Conservancy (“the grantee”) to acquire approximately 8,085 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and Kekawaka Creek in Trinity County for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, providing public access and recreation, and protecting open space and natural resources, 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 for the acquisition 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 protecting open space and natural resources. 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.
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 \$3,950,000 grant to The Wildlands Conservancy (“TWC”) for acquisition of approximately 8,085 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch Property at the confluence of the Eel River mainstem and Kekawaka Creek in Trinity County (see Exhibit 1). The project represents the final phase of the acquisition of the formerly private 26,600-acre Lone Pine Ranch for the purposes of preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, providing public access and recreation, and protecting open space and natural resources. When added to the TWC’s adjacent 3,000-acre Emerald Waters Reserve, this acquisition will result in the permanent protection of 29,600 acres of land along the Eel River.

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. The Eel River ecosystem supports over 75 mammal species, 400 bird species, and 15 species of fish. Anadromous fish species such as salmon and steelhead trout have seen dramatic population declines because of anthropogenic impacts to water quality, overfishing, water diversions, and dams. 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 critical to help protect the Eel River and the species that rely on its clean water and habitat mosaics to survive.

Because the majority of the properties along the river are in private ownership, public recreational opportunities are limited throughout the Eel River region. This acquisition project will provide opportunities to develop new passive recreation on the property, possibly including new hiking trails, bicycling, horseback riding, camping, kayak/raft put-ins on the Eel River, and interpretive education opportunities. Up to 9.5 miles of the proposed Great Redwood Trail will run through the Eel River Canyon Preserve and Emerald Waters Reserve and provide ample opportunities for its users to explore and connect with the natural environment within the project area. The surrounding disadvantaged communities of Alderpoint, Covelo, Mina, and others will benefit from new public access to the ranch. TWC intends to offer its recreational opportunities on the Eel River Canyon Preserve to the general public for free.

The Lone Pine Ranch lies on the eastern banks of the main stem of the Eel River between the North Fork Eel and Kekawaka Creek. Since the 1940s, the 26,600-acre Lone Pine Ranch was owned by the Dean Witter Family who primarily used the property for cattle ranching, timber harvesting, and private recreation. Starting in 2019, TWC began working with several partners to acquire the entire Lone Pine Ranch property in fee title with the intention to operate the property as a protected nature preserve and open it to the public free of charge. In October 2019, TWC acquired the northwardly adjacent 3,000-acre White Ranch property (renamed Emerald Waters Reserve), and simultaneously entered into an option agreement for the entire Lone Pine Ranch.

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 TWC, 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. 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 TWC 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 (see Exhibit 1).

To accomplish the acquisition, TWC divided the 26,600 acres of the Lone Pine Ranch into four strategic funding areas. Most of the strategic funding areas were acquired previously by TWC's partnerships with the State Coastal Conservancy, the Wildlife Conservation Board, Center for Biological Diversity, and private philanthropic sources. The Conservancy funded acquisition of the 7,480-acre Area 1 in 2021. The Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit organization, purchased 8,085 acres of the ranch known as Area 3 concurrently with Wildlands' purchase of the remainder of the Ranch using loan funds from the Packard Foundation. The Conservation Fund's purchase was completed as a "bridge" transaction to give TWC more time to raise funds to acquire the entire property. The proposed Conservancy grant, in combination with an expected grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board, will enable TWC to purchase Area 3 from the Conservation Fund, bringing the ranch back under single ownership and permanently protecting the property.

To provide an in-kind match to the public funding, TWC will place permanent use restrictions on title to its 3,000-acre Emerald Waters Reserve adjacent to the north of the Eel River Canyon Preserve. The restrictions will protect the Emerald Waters Reserve for the same purposes as this acquisition: preserving and restoring fish and wildlife habitat, providing public access and recreation, and protecting open space and natural resources. The restrictions will designate the Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board (authorization pending) as entities with enforcement authority over the restrictions and will result in a total protected acreage of 11,085 acres for the final phase of this project.

Site Description: The Lone Pine Ranch, now known as the Eel River Canyon Preserve, spans roughly 26,600 contiguous acres south of the town of Alderpoint, in rural northern Mendocino and southern Trinity counties.

The preserve's ecological assets include more than 15 miles of the Eel River main stem, 4 miles of the North Fork Eel River, and tributaries Kekawaka Creek, Willow Creek, Boulder Creek, and Wilson Creek. The property is comprised of native grasslands, foothill and valley forests and woodlands, mixed evergreen and montane conifer forests, chaparral, marshlands, ponds, freshwater creeks, riverine floodplain, and other riparian habitats. (See Exhibit 3 – photos) These habitats support a diverse flora of more than 500 species of vascular plants and equally diverse fauna, including rare, special concern, threatened, and endangered animal species such as Pacific fisher, Roosevelt elk, golden eagle, peregrine falcon, northern spotted owl, northwest pond turtle, steelhead trout, chinook salmon, coho salmon, foothill yellow-legged frogs, and southern torrent salamander. The river supports over 75 mammal species, 400 bird species, and 15 species of fish. The diversity of topography, elevation range and precipitation values provides climate resiliency for the many habitats and species supported on the property.

In addition to its significant natural resource values, the Great Redwood Trail right-of-way runs just within the western boundary of the preserve. This defunct rail line, now formally railbanked, is envisioned to become part of the nascent Great Redwood Trail.

This staff recommendation is for acquisition of the approximately 8,085-acre Project Area 3 of Lone Pine Ranch located in Trinity County. Natural resources in Area 3 include all of the plant and animal communities present across the full 26,600-acre ranch property. Area 3 also

includes up to 4.8 miles of the proposed Great Redwood Trail and a possible vehicle access anchor point to the trail at Kekawaka Creek.

TWC's 3,000-acre Emerald Waters Reserve is split between Humboldt and Trinity Counties and includes up to 4.7 miles of the proposed Great Redwood Trail along the Eel River. The reserve ranges in elevation from 340 feet to 2,600 feet and is dominated by white oak woodland and white oak savanna that cascade down the steep slopes to the river. Other trees on the property include bay laurel, buckeye, and pockets of Douglas fir. Wildlife includes a robust population of large mammals including a herd of native Roosevelt elk that occasionally roam the property.

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 twenty-three preserves encompassing 193,000 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 total, TWC has preserved more than 800,000 acres of land with private funds.

TWC has demonstrated experience as a successful project partner, having completed acquisitions of the Estero Americano Coast Preserve, Santa Margarita River Trails Preserve, and Area 1 of the Lone Pine Ranch property (Eel River Canyon Preserve) and public access improvements at the Jenner Headlands Preserve with grants from the State Coastal Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, 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 proposed project to acquire the 8,085 acre property in the Eel River watershed is a good investment of state resources because (1) it will contribute to meeting the state's natural and working lands conservation goals as required by the Governor's 30 x 30 Executive Order; (2) it will advance state and regional water quality improvement goals; (3) it will help protect and enhance the biodiversity of habitats for state and federal threatened and sensitive species; and 4) it will help to advance the Great Redwood 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.

Round Valley Indian Tribes (RVIT) reservation land shares a border with the Eel River Canyon Preserve along the North Fork of the Eel. The Preserve is the ancestral land of the Wailaki people, members of RVIT. In September 2022, TWC hosted the RVIT Tribal Council for a tour to discuss mutually beneficial goals and opportunities on the Preserve. Council Members expressed interest in access, cultural monitoring, economic opportunities, and educational and recreational opportunities for Tribal youth. TWC and Tribal representatives have shared numerous conversations with Tribal Council members, elders, community leaders, and neighbors about how to proceed in a respectful, welcoming, and engaging way. TWC has also committed in public agreements to develop a Tribal Co-Management Memorandum of Understanding as part of the Preserve’s Management Plan to engage Tribal communities, including RVIT and Bear River Band of Rohnerville Rancheria.

TWC staff has connected with the RVIT community by participating in key events in Covelo, such as The Big Time, Eel River Forum, Earth Day, Round Valley High School Academic Achievement Day, and the Blackberry Festival. At each event community members were invited to attend a Preserve tour and provide feedback on how they envision the Preserve serving the community’s needs. TWC provided three Round Valley tours in Spring 2023 and is currently collaborating with the Round Valley School District to plan for high school age students to attend field trips to the Preserve in Fall 2023.

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

Acquisition of Area 3 will result in sole ownership by TWC, a conservation organization, of the formerly private 26,600-acre Lone Pine Ranch. TWC is committed to long-term sustainable management of the property’s natural resources and public recreation opportunities compatible with natural resource values. Land management may include restoration to promote long-term improvements to animal and plant life and to improve water quality and aquatic habitat resiliency for Chinook and coho salmon, and steelhead trout.

To address climate change and wildland fire resiliency, TWC plans to develop a vegetation management plan, a grazing management plan, and a plan to hydrologically disconnect and repair the Preserve’s roads. These plans will be developed using the foundation of on-the-ground knowledge being developed by staff and partners currently, and will be shared for input with agency partners, local tribal communities, and scientific professionals.

Because Lone Pine Ranch is located on the mainstem and North Fork of the Eel River, over 26 miles inland from the coast, it is not vulnerable to sea level rise scenarios for the years 2050 and 2100.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The proposed project will (1) complete efforts to create the Eel River Canyon Preserve, thereby providing watershed and landscape scale connectivity and protecting in perpetuity over 29,000 acres of valuable fish and wildlife habitat; (2) provide an opportunity to decrease sediment inputs and enhance aquatic habitat values of up to 15 miles of the Eel River, a salmon-spawning

river with essential habitat for critically endangered Chinook and coho salmon and steelhead trout; (3) provide an opportunity to enhance habitat for the following listed species: 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, pacific fisher, and Roosevelt elk; (5) benefit a disadvantaged community; (6) provide nature education and support and access for scientific surveys and academic studies; and (7) provide unique recreational access to the Eel River and a willing landowner and partner in development of The Great Redwood Trail.

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

TWC has provided community tours for locals from Kettenpom, Zenia, Alderpoint, Palo Verde, and Covelo and has met with and provided access to faculty from Cal Poly Humboldt and Mendocino College to discuss potential academic programs and student internships at the Preserve. TWC has hosted the nonprofit Hunters of Color for multi-day trips at the Preserve to pursue a formal relationship where their ambassadors can utilize the land and facilities to provide mentorship and hunting opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. As a willing landowner and an active ally of the Great Redwood Trail project, TWC has been talking with neighboring ranchers and farmers about the trail, asking them about their concerns, and discussing how to actively serve as good neighbors.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$3,950,000
Wildlife Conservation Board (pending)	\$3,950,000
Project Total	\$7,900,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from the FY 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of climate resilience (The Budget Act of 2022, SB 154). These funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the climate resilience funds, including projects that protect coastal watersheds and increase the resilience of coastal ecosystems to climate change impacts. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will permanently protect 8,085 acres of a coastal watershed including an important wildlife corridor, and it contains diverse habitat types that will facilitate climate migration of native species.

As an in-kind match, TWC will place appropriate permanent use restrictions enforceable by the Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board (authorization pending) on the adjacent 3,000-acre Emerald Waters Reserve property.

TWC is contributing approximately \$75,000 in indirect expenses and in-kind services to this acquisition for staff time and other associated costs such as due diligence.

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project 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). Under Section 31220(a), the Conservancy may award grants for coastal watershed resources protection projects if the projects meet one or more of the objectives detailed in Section 31220(b), which include protecting fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed (Section 31220(b)(2)) and providing for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives (Section 31220(b)(8)). The project is consistent with these objectives as it will result in the protection of 8,085 acres of coastal watershed lands containing critical mountain lion, Chinook and coho salmon, and steelhead trout habitat, and will provide public access amenities for users of the proposed Great Redwood Trail.

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 a local watershed management plan (the Eel River Watershed Management Area, Section 2.5 of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board’s Watershed Management Initiative Chapter), as discussed in greater detail below.

As required by Section 31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board to ensure consistency with Public Resources Code Division 20.4, Chapter 3 (the Clean Beaches Program).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systematically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will provide educational and recreational opportunities for locals from the disadvantaged communities of Kettenpom, Zenia, Alderpoint, Palo Verde, and Covelo. TWC will enter into a Tribal Co-Management Memorandum of Understanding as part of the Preserve’s Management Plan to engage appropriate tribal communities.

Consistent with **Goal 3.1 Conserve Land**, the proposed project will protect 11,085 acres of land (which includes the 3,000-acre Emerald Waters Reserve) identified in regionally led and scientifically based planning efforts to protect high quality resources and increase habitat. The project will also help to facilitate the future development of the Great Redwood Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project is a wildlife corridor protection project in that it 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.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Eel River Watershed Management Area Section 2.5 of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board’s “Watershed Management Initiative Chapter”. 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 will enable future riparian, floodplain, and forest restoration that 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 Area’s recommendation to “endorse the concept of establishing a ‘river corridor,’” TWC’s 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 Section 15313 because this project is an acquisition of land to preserve fish and wildlife habitat; Section 15316, because this project is an acquisition for the purpose of establishing a park where no management plan has been prepared yet; and Section 15325 because the project involves the transfer of ownership interests in land to preserve open space or enhance natural conditions, including plant or animal habitats. The proposed project will preserve the existing natural conditions and habitats of the Property, and a management plan for the Property has not yet been prepared.

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