

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 15, 2024

**MILL BEND PRESERVE PUBLIC ACCESS AND RESTORATION  
PLANNING AND DESIGN**

Project No.19-012-02  
Project Manager: Su Corbaley (Lisa Ames)

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,660,000 to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy to prepare designs, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for establishing 2.6 miles of new public access trails and related public access amenities, including .75 miles of the California Coastal Trail, and restoring 4 acres of upland habitat for the Mill Bend Preserve at the mouth of the Gualala River in Mendocino and Sonoma counties.

**LOCATION:** Lower Gualala River and Estuary, Mendocino and Sonoma counties

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)  
Exhibit 3: [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 one million six hundred sixty thousand dollars (\$1,660,000) to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (“the grantee” or “RCLC”) to prepare designs, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for establishing 2.6 miles of new public access trails and related public access amenities, including .75 miles of the California Coastal Trail, and for restoring 4 acres of upland habitat for the Mill Bend Preserve at the mouth of the Gualala River in Mendocino and Sonoma counties.

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.

In addition, to the extent appropriate, RCLC shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards'.

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.
3. The RCLC is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,660,000 grant to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy ("RCLC") to prepare designs, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for establishing 2.6 miles of new public access trails and related amenities, including .75 miles of the California Coastal Trail, and restoring 4 acres of upland habitat for the Mill Bend Preserve at the mouth of the Gualala River in Mendocino and Sonoma counties (See Exhibit 1).

The ecologically rich Mill Bend Preserve ("Preserve") spans Highway 1 in a highly visible, well-traveled location. The town of Gualala is immediately adjacent to the north of the Preserve and Gualala Point Regional Park in Sonoma County lies to the south on the other side of the Gualala River. The Preserve contains estuarine and riverine wetlands and uplands and provides critical habitat for numerous threatened and endangered species and regionally sensitive plant and animal species. The uplands include a former timber mill site and a historical pioneer cemetery (See Exhibit 2). Currently, there is no developed public access to the estuary and river from the town of Gualala. Most people only experience this segment of the coast by briefly driving through it on Highway 1, or via unsafe and ecologically damaging informal trails. The Preserve represents a missing link in the California Coastal Trail, with the Gualala Bluff Trail, an existing segment of the Coastal Trail constructed and maintained by RCLC, adjacent to the north, and trails of the neighboring regional park to the south. In addition to the lack of walkable, ADA-accessible, safe, and free access, there is a need for ecological restoration of the Preserve's diverse native coastal habitat. The former mill site on the uplands is comprised of extensive asphalt, concrete, and highly invasive plants which limit water infiltration, habitat value, and climate resilience on the site, and pose a fire hazard.

RCLC acquired the 113-acre Preserve in 2020 with funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), California Natural Resources Agency, and Conservancy. As part of the acquisition and resource management planning project approved by the Conservancy in 2020, RCLC developed a Conservation Plan to address these goals for the site: future wetland and upland habitat restoration, environmental education and research, resource-sensitive public access trails for fishing and wildlife-oriented recreation, and addressing gaps in the California Coastal Trail. With public and agency input, the Conservation Plan was completed in 2022 and recommended that the site development include: a Coastal Trail segment running the north-south length of the Preserve with trailheads and parking; improvements to an existing estuary access road off of Highway 1; a short boardwalk, located on an existing alignment and designed for sea level rise resilience to allow visitors to experience the unique estuary setting; Preserve parking that makes use of existing informal parking areas; upland trails visiting redwood forest and the historic cemetery; and restoration of the old mill site above the highway. The proposed project will contribute to implementation of some of the recommendations in the Conservation Plan. Project features are almost entirely on RCLC property, but will include encroachment on the Caltrans right-of-way, including for crosswalk development. Project tasks include:

- Furthering the design for restoring 4 acres of the highly disturbed old mill site to native coastal scrub, grassland, and forest habitat;
- Preparing designs for 2.6 miles of new trails, including 0.75 miles of the California Coastal Trail and 1,000 feet of boardwalk for estuary exploration;
- Preparing designs for 3 new public restrooms, 5 picnic areas, 3 trailheads, and 2 historic and cultural interpretive elements;
- Engaging with local California Native American tribes during design of natural and cultural interpretation components and possibly other components depending on tribal interests;
- Preparing permit applications for 3 project elements: Estuary Access, California Coastal Trail Extension, and Mill Site Restoration.
- Preparing a document analyzing the environmental effects of the public access and restoration designs sufficient to comply with CEQA.

**Site Description:** The 113-acre Mill Bend Preserve is located at the mouth and 1.5-mile lower reach of the Gualala River, an important anadromous salmonid stream that forms the boundary between Sonoma and Mendocino counties. The property is comprised of 54 acres of estuarine and palustrine wetlands that lie west of Highway 1 and 59 acres east of Highway 1 containing upland, forest, and riverine habitats (see Exhibit 1). The Preserve provides access to a one-acre inholding within the 59-acre parcel consisting of a historical cemetery from the 1800s.

The Mill Bend wetlands (including seasonally flooded alder and willow groves, coastal scrub, emergent freshwater, and tidal marsh) contain critical habitat for threatened and endangered species including steelhead trout, coho salmon, red-legged frog, tri-colored blackbird, the plant Roderick's Fritillary, and numerous regionally sensitive plant and animal species. Many species sensitive to disturbance inhabit and/or utilize the Gualala watershed and its estuary, including

northern spotted owls, marbled murrelets, bank swallows, a pair of bald eagles, river otters, pacific lamprey, and numerous coastal dependent and migratory birds.

The uplands (redwood forest, bishop pine forest, and grassland) throughout the property include non-native, invasive plant species. Before the Mill Bend property was purchased and actively managed by RCLC, off-road vehicles drove onto the estuarine beach west of Highway 1, and there was an occasional homeless encampment in the scrub wetlands. The 59-acre upland parcel contains remnants of an old lumber mill with areas of broken asphalt and cement.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The RCLC is the local land trust dedicated to conserving open spaces and the natural environment and expanding public access in southern Mendocino County and northern Sonoma County. Founded in 1992, RCLC holds and manages local conservation easements and land in fee between Gualala and Point Arena to carry out its mission. RCLC has completed several acquisitions and coastal trail planning and implementation projects with community input and Conservancy support, including the Mill Bend Preserve, Hearn Gulch, Saunders Landing, Cooks Beach, and the Gualala Bluff Trail (all part of the California Coastal Trail).

RCLC is currently receiving Conservancy Wildfire Resilience grant funding and a grant award from the California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) to improve salmonid habitat in the Gualala River.

#### **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 is a good investment of state resources because 1) it contributes to the State's objective to complete the Coastal Trail system and address trail gaps along the California coast; (2) it will build upon previous state investments; (3) it has a reasonable budget covering trail and habitat restoration planning and design; and (4) it will further efforts to protect and enhance the biodiversity of habitats for state and federal threatened and sensitive species.

##### **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.**

During development of the Conservation Plan, RCLC invited tribal representatives affiliated to the project area to meet with RCLC representatives, as well as to participate in a stakeholder meeting, and provide input on the Conservation Plan. For the proposed project, the

Manchester and Kashia Bands of Pomo Indians will be invited to provide guidance on developing signage or programming that allows Native American voices and experiences on this landscape to be heard. The tribes will also be invited to provide guidance and oversight on protecting tribal resources during public access development, and input on stewardship of vegetation on the site. Compensation for this work is included in the project's proposed budget. The tribes will also be invited to formally consult on the project as part of the CEQA process. Public presentations and documents for the project will continue to acknowledge that the Preserve is part of the ancestral lands of the Yokaya, Bokeya, and Kashia Pomo. RCLC and the CEQA Lead Agency (expected to be Mendocino County) for the environmental review of final designs and implementation will invite tribal representatives to a focused site visit, or meeting at a location convenient to them, to orient them to the project and gather their input.

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

Public access to the estuary will be designed to be resilient to climate change, sea level rise, and increased seasonal flooding. For example, the estuary access road surface will be designed to withstand increased flooding, and the boardwalk will be elevated and designed to be able to be raised further in the future. Other project access elements including upland trails and interpretive signage will be designed to be durable and low maintenance.

Habitat restoration will be designed to bring back native species that are well-suited to the site in both its current state and future climate conditions, and to increase plant diversity to provide better resilience to variable future conditions. Increased diversity and water capture/retention will also improve the site's ability to withstand drought, increased temperatures, and more extreme storm events.

To ensure that project designs will be feasible for purposes of securing permits and implementing, RCLC engaged early in the planning process with regulatory agencies, and has held several recent meetings with Sonoma County Regional Parks leadership, program managers, and grants staff, discussing funding opportunities that would serve both Mill Bend Preserve and the Gualala Point Regional Park, given shared objectives. Potential implementation funding opportunities being considered are Wildlife Conservation Board (Public Access Program, Habitat Enhancement and Restoration Program) and Caltrans mitigation funds.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The proposed project will design for increased public access for all abilities, improved habitat diversity, and increased carbon sequestration (with designs for restoration of native forest on the old mill site). Future implementation of the access improvements will help reduce vehicle trips by providing a safe route for pedestrians to travel up and down the coast near Gualala, and reduce impacts to sensitive wetland habitat from informal trails by focusing public use on carefully designed trails.

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

RCLC has engaged key stakeholders through the Conservation Plan development process, and has received support for initial public access and restoration plans from Mendocino County Planning Department, Caltrans, Sonoma County Regional Parks, California Coastal Commission,

Gualala Arts Center, and Sonoma Land Trust. The North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, CDFW, and the US Army Corps of Engineers also participated in the Technical Working Group advising the Conservation Plan process. RCLC reached out to tribal representatives to solicit input on the Conservation Plan process. Sonoma County Regional Parks is also collaborating with RCLC on estuary enhancement planning at Mill Bend through a grant recently awarded from the CDFW Fisheries Restoration Grant Program. Partners that will play a key role in the project that is the subject of this authorization include:

- The Manchester and Kashia Bands of Pomo Indians, as noted above.
- RCLC will coordinate with Caltrans and request encroachment permits to allow for a highway crosswalk, estuary access road improvements, and limited trail segments in the Caltrans right-of-way.
- Mendocino Council of Governments and Caltrans are in the process of completing plans for the Gualala Downtown Streetscape Enhancement project with construction set to begin in 2026. RCLC will collaborate with both in planning crosswalks and extending safe access onto the Preserve.
- Adjacent landowners, including commercial property at the north end and a residential landowner adjacent to the Preserve main entrance, will continue to be engaged by RCLC as the design process progresses to ensure the plans are compatible and acceptable.
- Sonoma County Regional Parks, Mendocino County Planning Department, and all of the other stakeholders previously engaged will be invited to continue to collaborate in the planning process.

The proposed project will advance RCLC’s overarching vision for the Preserve as a broad community resource, providing nature-based recreational and educational opportunities to surrounding populations, including school children. With its native habitats, timber-era impacts, European settler cemetery, and long preceding Native history, the Preserve is an ideal basecamp for learning.

#### **PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,660,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,660,000</b>

Conservancy funding for the proposed project is expected to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation to the Conservancy from the General Fund for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies” (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of SB 155 (Chapter 258, Statutes of 2021), which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including projects for non-motorized trails of statewide significance and coastal resilience projects along the coast.

The proposed project is consistent with the funding purposes as it will plan for the future development of a segment of the Coastal Trail, which is a trail of statewide significance. The proposed project will also design for climate resilience in planning for connecting trails and amenities and coastal habitat restoration, thereby enhancing and protecting coastal watershed resources for the benefit of local wildlife and the public.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy has a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Consistent with these provisions, the proposed project will plan and design 2.6 miles of new public trail to and along the southern Mendocino and northern Sonoma coast. RCLC is a non-profit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

The proposed project is necessary to facilitate development of a new segment of the Coastal Trail and connecting trails along the Mendocino and Sonoma coast. The recommended grant is consistent with Section 31408, which authorizes the Conservancy to coordinate development of the Coastal Trail in consultation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, the California Coastal Commission, and Caltrans. The proposed project has involved coordination with Caltrans and the Coastal Commission, which have cooperated with the Conservancy and RCLC in planning for the Mill Bend Preserve to be available for development of the Coastal Trail.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will integrate local California Native American tribes' interests and concerns into the project designs and engage them in interpretation that allows Native American voices and experiences on this landscape to be heard.

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the proposed project will design the 2.6 miles of inland and Coastal Trail to be accessible for all users.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will plan for the future construction of 2.6 miles of new trail, including .75 miles of new Coastal Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will plan for picnic areas, restrooms, and interpretive signage to enhance coastal recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will design for the restoration of 4 acres of degraded upland coastal scrub and bishop pine forest habitats.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project involves only information collection, planning and feasibility studies, resource evaluation, and preparation of designs and environmental review documents for possible future action that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Therefore, the project is statutorily and categorically exempt from review under California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Sections 15262 and 15306, which exempt these types of activities for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded. Consistent with section 15262, the project includes consideration of environmental factors. Consistent with section 15306, the project will not result in disturbance to any environmental resource.

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