



Elk River Watershed Stewardship Program

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

California Trout is the largest freshwater restoration organization in the state dedicated to rejuvenating watersheds, with a mission of ensuring healthy waters and resilient, wild fish for a better California. We work to solve complex resource issues throughout the state and are known for driving innovative, science-based practices, championing

JEDI Efforts and Impact

CalTrout has built a culture over 5 years that centers DEIJ principals through trainings, internal reckoning and formal tools like the DEIJ rubric that assesses each of our projects in that regard. Interestingly, toward the end of last year we decided to remove our DEIJ statement online, to revisit our collective definitions of equity, to rewrite and

legislation and policies on behalf of rivers and fish, establishing broad regional coalitions, and bringing together diverse interests – farmers, ranchers, agencies, tribes, conservationists, and other stakeholders –to achieve landscape-scale rejuvenation of our river ecosystems. Established in 1971 by a group of passionate anglers, we've been the voice advocating for, protecting, and restoring the state's natural resources for over 50 years. Today, we have scaled up to meet the challenges of the day focusing on nature-based solutions that build resilience to the impacts of climate change for the health of our rivers, fish, and communities.

Final Success

With our Stewardship focus on two large Planning Areas of the Elk River valley totaling 1,413 acres, 40+ private landowners, the acquisition of 175 acres threatened with sea level rise, and the returned of unceded lands to the Wiyot Tribe, we intend to amplify our communication and outreach efforts in order to share this landscape-scale, transformative restoration program with the local community.

Location Details

recommit, before posting. Then the change in federal administration happened and the need to publicly stand up our position felt imperative – even as we examine our internal culture and areas for growth. We are integrating DEIJ values by prioritizing inclusive storytelling, expanding outreach efforts, diversifying partnerships and working towards multilingual content to better serve our communities. Internally, staff continue to participate in a DEIJ training intensives like the Learning Journey and monthly Culture Call where diverse perspectives and tools are shared to integrate DEIJ practices in our projects statewide.

The Elk River watershed is currently the focus of intensive efforts to resolve very complex land use and water quality issues. Since the beginning of European-American settlement of the Humboldt Bay region in the 1850s, the Elk River and its floodplain (including coastal marsh habitats) have been degraded by land use (farming, ranching, and timber), and urbanization and infrastructure encroachment (roads, bridges, and houses). Levees and dikes were constructed to create and maintain valley bottomlands suitable for farming and ranching, and roads and railroads were built to access agricultural lands and early timber operations. As a result, much of the pre-existing wetlands and coastal marsh habitats were converted to farmlands. In the middle and upper watershed, degradation resulting from 150 years of timber harvesting resulted in severe water quality degradation, consequent nuisance flooding, and severe habitat impairment. Rehabilitation requires a watershed-scale recovery effort. The Elk River Stewardship Program is a voluntary, community-driven program aiming to reduce flooding, remediate sediment impairment, and improve critical habitat for several threatened salmonid species.

The Program is directed by CalTrout in partnership with the Regional Water Board and a team of consulting engineers and scientists. This team completed a technical study in 2019 and initiated the Stewardship Program in 2022, resulting in a watershed scale Recovery Plan covering 19.2 miles of sediment impaired river channels and floodplains. Stakeholders in the Elk River Stewardship Program include several residential communities along the North and South Forks and at Elk River Court; the ranching/dairy community and their representative CA Farm Bureau mainly located in the Elk River valley; non-profit conservation and advocacy organizations including CalTrout, Salmon Forever, Environmental Protection

Information Center, the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Association; the Wiyot Tribe; timberland owners; and State and Federal fish and wildlife agencies.

Our current focus is in Planning Area 1: the Tidal and Lower Valley Reaches, and Planning Area 2: the Fluvial Mainstem Reaches. These areas are threatened by sea level rise (the highest relative sea level rise in CA due to land subsidence), outdated and unmaintained drainage infrastructure, severe winter flooding that threatens homes and properties, and a critical loss of fish and wildlife habitats.

Biodiversity in Project Area

Across 1,413ac of Planning Areas 1 &2, our Program includes objectives for climate resiliency and biodiversity: (1) implement a sea level rise managed retreat strategy with voluntary land acquisitions and active restoration of those lands to accelerate recovery trajectory(2)investment in habitat rehabilitation & restoration of public lands totaling 275ac with recent acquisitions, that will protect public trust resource benefits in perpetuity; (3)significant contributions to restoration and ecological uplift by private ranching and dairy landowners on working lands, targeting aquatic and wetland habitats, connectivity, and protections (e.g., cattle fencing) from active land uses, while simultaneously protecting and improving productivity of agricultural lands. Many private landowner partners are dedicating tens of ac of lands to habitat restoration. Restored habitats will include: Tidal wetlands and associated estuarine slough channels that were impacted by agricultural land conversions; Brackish marsh habitats where fresh and sea-water mixing zones create productive habitats for a highly diverse flora and fauna, including threatened salmonids and longfin smelt, endangered tidewater goby, Lyngby's sedge (state-listed species), *Angelica lucida*, western sand-spurrey, and Humboldt Bay owl's-clover; Riparian habitat along Elk River, Swain Slough, and Orton Creek that will provide expansion of habitat for nesting birds, amphibians, & other wildlife; Native coastal prairie grasslands that were thought to be extensive in the lower Elk River valley (they supported herds of Roosevelt Elk when land was colonized in the 1850's); many native grasslands have converted to non-native grasses for cattle and dairy ranching; Mainstem freshwater aquatic habitat in the Elk River that is critical for recovery of threatened coho salmon, steelhead trout, coastal cutthroat trout, and Pacific lamprey. Our restoration design team prioritizes actions that connect habitats at a range of elevations and salinities to

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

The economic impacts of our program are hard to quantify, but we believe they are significant. First, we're facilitating agricultural landowners threatened by sea level rise with the opportunity to retain their property value and equity by transferring that value to other lands that can stay in agricultural production for the foreseeable future, thus helping them (at least one landowner to-date) avoid a catastrophic loss of land value. Second, we're proposing to implement measures specifically intended to protect remaining viable working lands (e.g., eco-levees, improved drainage infrastructure) and thus allow those lands to continue their agricultural production. Third, once we're into the project implementation phases, our program will bring significant grant dollars to this local disadvantaged community, awarding construction contracts that pay state prevailing wages to skilled laborers and construction equipment operators, plant nurseries and revegetation specialists, as well as supporting our local planning and engineering firms. To-date, just since 2021, our Elk River program has been awarded an astounding \$16,582,000 in state and federal funding; our funding partners include – the State Coastal Conservancy, the CA Wildlife Conservation Board, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the NOAA Coastal Zone Management Program; additionally, we have tremendous support from private foundations – the Resources Legacy Fund, The Conservation Alliance, and private CalTrout donors.

We are also proposing expansion and upgrades to public access on existing and newly-acquired public lands; these lands will be owned and managed by the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife as part of the Elk River Wildlife Area (ERWA). The ERWA public access amenities will provides public trails and outdoor activities in close proximity to the Eureka community, allowing hiking and nature observation, outdoor recreation and environmental education, seasonal birding and waterfowl hunting.

allow migration in response to climate change, and work with changing geomorphic processes, such as deposition of sediment onto a restored marsh plain, to give the ecosystems a better chance of persisting in the valley into the future. Elk River Stewardship program Areas link protected lands in the upper watershed (managed by BLM) with protected lands in the Estuary (owned by the City of Eureka), all public lands that are or will be restored for habitat and public access.

**Strategy & Timeline
For Final Success**

Given the enormity of our Program Area, we've partitioned the area into several Planning Areas, and divided the process into successive well-planned and repeatable phases. With our foundational technical studies completed in 2014-2019 (Elk River Recovery Assessment) and our extensive community outreach conducted in 2018-22 (but still ongoing) that culminated in a watershed-wide Recovery Strategy (the Elk River Recovery Plan), we've now transitioned into a three-stage project design and implementation process. Phase 1 conducts baseline existing conditions assessments and a conceptual design process in which proposed actions are analyzed, described and agreed-to by landowners, and vetted with a resource agency technical committee; this phase results in a 10% engineering level design, and takes about 18-24 months to complete for each Planning Area. Phase 2 incorporates the technical development of native habitat features (e.g., aquatic and wetland habitat design, revegetation, non-native vegetation suppression), engineering design and flooding assessments, continued collaboration with landowners, and a full suite of regulatory compliance steps including CEQA Authorization and regulatory permit applications. Phase 3 moves through the project implementation phase, with the preparation of final engineering designs and construction plans, public bidding and project awards to a general contracting company, and construction of earthworks and infrastructure features, revegetation and erosion control measures, and a post-construction project performance and monitoring phase.

-In Planning Area 1, Phase 1 began in 2021 with grants from the State Coastal Conservancy and the Wildlife Conservation Board; Phase 2 began in 2023 with continued support from the Coastal Conservancy for engineering design and a \$1.8M land acquisition and land-back to the Wiyot Tribe. In 2024, we were awarded funding from the NOAA Coastal Zone Management Program for the first phase of implementation scheduled to be constructed in 2026 on

Key Decision Makers

There isn't a particular sector of the business community, per se, that we're trying to "influence" with our Program. However, there are several key issues that will emerge from our program for which we do hope to influence public perceptions. Those issues include sea level rise and the managed retreat strategy that we're advocating and designing for. Some members of our community may not believe in the degree of threat from sea level rise, or believe ours is the right approach. Next, retiring agricultural lands from production has been somewhat controversial in the past, as it is an important part of our community's rural traditions and the county's tax base. Finally, there's been controversy in our community in the past over even the types of wetlands to be restored – freshwater vs. tidal wetlands, and some may not like our approach of converting "reclaimed" former tidal wetlands back to their natural state.

For these and other reasons, we hope to put forth a solid communications strategy and plan to present to the public our plans and rationale.



the newly acquired Swain Slough properties.

-In Planning Area 2, Phase 1 began in 2023 with an award from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and we were recently awarded Phase 2 funding from NFWF that will carry this Area through 2027.

We have begun significant efforts toward fundraising for the forthcoming implementation phases of our program, which we anticipate will require at least 5-6 years of annual phased construction during the summer construction season beginning in 2026 (restoration projects can only work during a very short June 15-October 15 construction season).

Given the scale of this Program and the considerable time and funding investment that will be required to carry through with this effort, we have made it a priority to collaborate extensively with our resource agency partners, the Wiyot Tribe, private landowners, and our funding partners. This collaboration brings this community of partners into tangible participation in, and contribution to, our Program, so that there is buy-in and active support for our proposed actions and outcomes. This collaboration requires extensive time and effort to build strong working relationships. This collaboration includes as many as 40 landowners that have the time and interest in participating in our collaboration; approximately 30 resource agency partners, and many other public members interested in our progress.

Finally, given the above, we believe that an expanded public outreach effort to bring this transformational program to the public's attention is needed. We are proposing numerous communications steps over the next year to facilitate a broader community understanding of the Program. Our communications plans include:

- Press release announcements at significant project milestones (such as project grant awards, completion of acquisitions, stages of engineering design, proposed public access amenities);
- CalTrout social media communications (blog-posts, podcasts, newsletter articles);
- Public Meetings to review proposed project actions and regulatory authorizations like CEQA
- Interpretive signage permanently installed at public access sites;
- A story map and story board (web-based, graphically-rich story-telling);
- Continued Elk River Stewardship Newsletter that is printed and mailed to all river-adjacent landowners to prioritize



their understanding of proposed actions;
 -Outreach to local press (Eureka Times-Standard, Lost Coast Outpost, North Coast Journal) to facilitate feature articles focusing on our the Elk River program;
 -A printed 8-12 page glossy summary of the Elk River Recovery Plan and our Planning Area design reports, for public distribution;
 -A short 2-3 minute video of the program and project construction phases.

Elevate Voices

The primary underrepresented group that we're most trying to elevate is the Wiyot Tribe, but only to the extent they welcome our engagement. They are a small tribe centered in "Wigi" or Humboldt Bay, and have a lot of ongoing activities in the region. Their tribal council is aware of our program's goals and activities, their natural resource department staff participate regularly in our technical design discussions, and their cultural resources department are engaged with us in the eco-cultural restoration design on the estuary property that is being returned to them. We've also offered funding to allow the expansion of their native plant nursery operation at the Table Bluff Reservation, so they can grow native plants that can be used in our restoration.

We are engaging local communities in several ways. First as described above in Question 7, we will be putting forth a very robust communications plan to bring detailed information about our project to the public, through various media formats. Second, we are also working extensively with our resource agency partners to review and refine our project designs so our project will help meet state and federal agency priorities and mandates for species and habitat recovery, and will not overstep agency restrictions (e.g., placing fill in wetlands). Finally, we are engaging extensively with a small set of landowners, mostly agricultural producers (ranching and dairy) and other private landowners, hoping to improve ecological conditions on their lands while protecting their business operations.

TCA Funding Plan

Our grant funding has very specific deliverables, and given its public funding, is restricted in how those funds are spent. Public outreach and communications are often lower priorities for grant programs. TCA's support will be vital to helping us accomplish our communications goals.

Our outreach program will aim to connect the local community with the project's climate analysis. This effort is aimed at building resilience through awareness of those most impacted by

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

- To come to an agreement with one landowner whose property is highly vulnerable to sea level rise, who doesn't want to sell, but may trade for other agricultural lands. We'll pursue locating replacement properties to enable a 1031 exchange
- To share plans for expanded public access on the State-owned Elk River Wildlife Area, and connect our new trail network and visitor interpretive "hubs" with the existing Hikshari' public trail to the west of our project along the Humboldt Bay shoreline via a class 2 bike lane
- To continue working with the Wiyot cultural resources experts to bring ecocultural restoration ideas and perspectives to their new property and to our project area, as well as participate in their cultural ceremonies on this property.
- To develop The Story Map and Story Board concepts for public outreach and engagement and we believe it will be a useful way to share our project with the public

How long it took to complete application

climate change, and therefore most dependent on the results of our analysis. The program will produce media, materials, and presentations in community spaces; articles on the implications of the project; a set of info graphics on our restoration designs and the community climate vulnerabilities. We will build public engagement opportunities for citizen/community science to deepen community connection with the project. Public access sites will be selected to build an engaging community science program.

Confidential Items

As we've described above in Questions 6, 8, and 10, our sea level rise managed retreat strategy is potentially controversial and impinges on private property rights of which landowners are often very protective. We rely on one-on-one private conversations with specific landowners to protect their own decision-making and anonymity; publicizing this kind of information in local press is usually not helpful. Having said that, I would assume your member company employees can be diplomatic about this topic, with little risk to our program.

Other Relevant Application Details

