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A Conservation Purchase of 3,400 Acres of Willow Creek Ranch Makes Magnificent Addition to Sonoma Coast State Beach

SAN FRANCISCO, CA—The Trust for Public Land, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, and California State Parks announced today the purchase and permanent public protection of 3,373 acres as a part of Sonoma Coast State Beach. An additional 515 acres are protected through two conservation easements preserving a total of nearly 3,900 acres of the Willow Creek property, just south of the Russian River in Sonoma County. The land being protected through this purchase was formerly owned by Mendocino Redwood Co., LLC. Sonoma Coast State Beach is the third busiest facility within the entire State Parks system.

"California State Parks has long sought to include this property within the Sonoma Coast State Beach," said Ruth Coleman, Director of State Parks. "This purchase makes this long time goal a reality and expands one of our most visited and beloved state parks," she added.

The purchase of the Willow Creek property creates 13,500 acres of protected landscape in western Sonoma County by linking together both public and privately conserved lands that extend from the Pacific Ocean to the coastal hills, including redwood forests and inland grasslands. There are plans to create a 15-mile loop trail through the Willow Creek property that will connect the towns of Occidental and Camp Meeker to the Coastal Trail near Jenner.

Reed Holderman, TPL—California's Executive Director said, "We appreciate the Mendocino Redwood Company's willingness to enter into a conservation sale of their property on this unique part of the North Coast. We also acknowledge the significant efforts of state Senator Wes Chesbro and Assemblymember Patty Berg, as well as our public agency partners in supporting public funding necessary to complete the purchase. Our state agencies could not do this critical work without park bond money approved by California voters. And, as always TPL can only do this work because of the support of our generous donors."

"The purchase of the Willow Creek Ranch property is an important acquisition that connects the coast to Sonoma County's lush forests and creeks," said Senator Wes Chesbro. "This creates a corridor for wildlife and public access."

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“This is good for wildlife, good for the environment, and good for generations and generations of Californians,” said Assemblywoman Patty Berg, D-Eureka. “I’m very pleased with the expansion of this important public resource.”

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) negotiated the purchase of the Willow Creek property and easements, and MRC agreed to protect the nearly 3,900 acres in this transaction for a cash consideration of \$20,785,000. TPL worked together with several agencies to secure funding for this public purchase. The Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District contributed \$10,225,000, the California Wildlife Conservation Board contributed \$4,187,000, the California State Coastal Conservancy contributed \$4,187,000, and the California Department of Parks and Recreation contributed \$2,186,000. The funds from these state agencies came from voter-approved park bond measures, Propositions 50 and 40.

“This purchase protects almost all of the Willow Creek and Freezeout Creek watersheds critical to the health and vitality of the Russian River. There are nearly 3-miles of fish bearing creeks and streams on the property, which offer an excellent opportunity for the successful reintroduction of coho salmon and steelhead trout,” said Al Wright, Executive Director of the California Wildlife Conservation Board.

“This major expansion of the Sonoma Coast State Beach adds incredible public access to Willow Creek Ranch’s redwood forests and creeks, offering spectacular opportunities for public recreation and enjoyment,” said Sam Schuchat, executive director of the California Coastal Conservancy.

With this purchase, 80 percent of the Willow Creek watershed is now permanently protected and will be a focus of restoration, using over \$600,000 in grant funds awarded by the State Water Resources Control Board and the California Department of Fish and Game. The restoration effort is supported by many enthusiastic volunteers from local West County nonprofits including LandPaths and the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods. In cooperation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, LandPaths will also be managing a controlled access permit program and docent led tours of the property. The California State Coastal Conservancy and the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District have each granted \$300,000 to assist DPR and LandPaths in planning, managing, and maintaining the new park over its first 5 years of operations.

Sandy Dean, Chairman of Mendocino Redwood Company (MRC), stated: “All of us at MRC want to express our sincere appreciation to the people and groups who have spent so much time and effort to put us in a position to be a part of this announcement today. We were privileged to work with Caryl Hart, Supervisor Mike Reilly, the Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and the Coastal Conservancy to protect this land forever. The Trust for Public Land has also played a critical role in developing this transaction.” (more)

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“As many in western Sonoma County know, Willow Creek is a special area. We are delighted that much of the Willow Creek watershed will soon be available to the public, to be enjoyed into the future,” continued Dean.

Public interest in protecting the property grew after a successful program to allow access through a permit system was initiated by Occidental resident and State Parks Commission Chair Caryl Hart and local nonprofit LandPaths. “This is a beautiful piece of property,” said Hart. “We could not be happier because acquiring this property has been one of the highest priorities of the local community and California State Parks. It adds wonderful recreational opportunities to Sonoma Coast State Beach.”

Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Reilly, former Chair and member of the California Coastal Commission, whose district includes the Willow Creek property, added, “Sonoma County has long been considered a leader in its efforts at land conservation and the Willow Creek agreement is a great example of what can be accomplished when the diverse interests of the community are linked for the public good.”

The Trust for Public Land is a national land conservation organization dedicated to conserving land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come. Founded in 1972, TPL has protected 2 million acres nationwide. Find TPL on-line at www.tpl.org. The Trust for Public Land has been greatly assisted throughout this complex real estate transaction by Barbara Kreig of Liner Yankelevitz Sunshine & Regenstreif LLP , who generously donated her time and legal skills.

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District was created in 1990 through two voter-approved ballot measures, including a one-quarter percent sales tax to fund agricultural and open space conservation. The District’s charge is to protect in perpetuity the diverse landscapes of Sonoma County. To date, the District has preserved more than 65,000 acres. For more information, find the District on-line at www.sonomaopenspace.org.

Mendocino Redwood Company (MRC) was formed in 1998 to manage more than 230,000 acres of redwood forestland with a high standard of environmental stewardship while also operating as a successful business. MRC was certified as being in compliance with the principals and criteria of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in 2000. You can learn more about MRC and the FSC at www.mrc.com and www.fscus.org.

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