

# Redwood Needles



Spring 2023

Sierra Club Redwood Chapter

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# On the Path

a note from  
Chapter Chair Victoria Brandon

The clock is ticking for northern California salmonids. Populations of dozens of species of salmon, steelhead and trout have been plunging for decades, and the immense schools that once spawned in rivers and tributaries great and small are just a memory. The situation is so dire that researchers predict more than half the anadromous species will be extinct in 50 years. The preponderant cause isn't overfishing, or disease, or invasive species: it is habitat loss.



Northern California summer-run steelhead are declining particularly precipitously, with less than 1,000 adults remaining and the strong possibility that they could become extinct by 2050 without intervention and habitat restoration on the Eel River. Genetically distinct from winter-run steelhead, these remarkable creatures swim faster, jump higher, and travel farther than their relatives.

By far their best hope for recovery lies with the removal of Cape Horn and Scott Dams on the main fork of the Eel River, action which will open nearly 300 miles of prime spawning habitat, with cold water and abundant boulders, woody debris, and undercut banks providing refuge from predators.

PG&E's decision to decommission the Potter Valley Project, the antiquated hydroelectric facility that operates the dams, has created an enormous opportunity to restore one of the North Coast's great wild salmonid rivers, enrich habitat not only for fish but also for many other wildlife species, generate exciting recreational opportunities, and support the Native people who have lived in harmony with this land since time immemorial.

These dams are well past the end of their useful life, and with no solvent entity willing to assume responsibility for their maintenance their removal is inevitable—but will removal come in time to prevent these iconic fish from disappearing forever? It is time to put an end to short-sighted and dangerous delaying tactics and transition to a dam free future.

We will continue to be vigilant and keep you informed. Please reach out if you'd like to be involved.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Victoria".



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by Shoshana Hebshi



# This Land is Your Land...

Redwood Chapter grapples with wins and losses in land conservation



Sierra Club was founded more than 130 years ago to act as a voice for land conservation. Industry and development have threatened wild places as the population has grown and demand for housing and businesses have encroached into once pristine land across the state and beyond.

The work that began then has not stopped. Our activist volunteers have been monitoring and advocating for land protection across our region, including at the Sonoma Developmental Center in Glen Ellen, in Napa County, where vineyards have been encroaching on open space and watersheds, combating sprawl across Sonoma County, fighting for forest protection in Mendocino County, and watershed protection in all parts of the region.

## Sacred Lands Returned to Karuk Tribe

The Karuk tribe was granted land by the federal government during the waning moments of 2022. Legislation sponsored by Sen. Alex Padilla and Rep. Jared Huffman and signed into law by President Biden, placed lands known as Katimiîn and Aamekyáaraam into trust for the Karuk.

For Karuk people, the land identified in this legis-

lation is the center of the world. The historical village of Katimiîn is the site of annual Pik-ya-vish (“to fix it”) world renewal ceremonies. Aamekyáaraam, just down river from Katimiîn, is the site of Jump Dance and First Salmon Ceremony—both vital components of pre-contact inter-tribal coordination of fish harvest up and down the river to ensure long-term sustainability of salmon runs. This area is essential to the inter-generational mentoring needed to ensure that Karuk culture and customs are passed along to future generations.

Although the tribe has obtained a Special Use Permit from the United States Forest Service allowing access to these areas for ceremonial purposes, this access is not guaranteed, and in some years has been interrupted by public intrusions during private and sacred components of the world renewal ceremonies.

Huffman celebrated this land-back milestone, saying, “These lands...are not only majestic, they are central to Karuk history, religion, traditions, and identity. Placing them in trust ensures that the Karuk culture and way of life can endure for future generations.”

Karuk Tribal Chair Russell Attebery responded, “It means the world to have our most sacred sites returned to us. The Karuk Tribe appreciates the hard work of Congressman Huffman, Senators Padilla and Feinstein, and their teams. This accomplishment is great for

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## Redwood Chapter Executive Committee

The executive committee is the governing body of the chapter, with one (1) member delegated by each of six (6) regional groups and six (6) members elected at large. Each group elects its own executive committee. The chapter ExCom meets every-other month over Zoom.

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\* Signifies voting member of the ExCom

# Conservation efforts are a central focus

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the Karuk People and all of Indian Country.”

— Victoria Brandon, Chapter Chair

## Walt Ranch land conservation plan in Napa is a big win

Napa’s lovers of wildlands were ecstatic this January to learn that the 2300-acre Walt Ranch on Atlas Peak is on track to be purchased by Land Trust of Napa County. The deal is not quite sealed, a lot more money needs to be raised (Napa Group and the Redwood Chapter are contributing \$4,000. To make your own contribution go to <https://napalandtrust.org/help-us-protect-walt-ranch/>).

The Land Trust will conserve the land in perpetuity, operating it in partnership with Napa Parks and Open Space District, raising hopes for public trails in this glorious spot high above the valley floor.

Walt Ranch is the epicenter of the biggest local environmental fight of recent memory: the plan by a Hall family company (vintners Craig and Kathryn Hall) to destroy 400 acres of Atlas Peak wild habitat in order to develop vineyards. For nearly a decade, starting in 2014, Sierra Club led the vigorous opposition to this project, which outraged a large segment of the Napa community, invigorating such organizations as Napa Vision 2050 and Defenders of East Napa Watersheds (DENW). The fight created a network of trusted allies which still exists.

The proposed plan would have clearcut over 28,000 trees in an environmental hotspot which harbors many threatened species, serves as an important wildlife corridor, and hosts the headwaters of Millikan Creek, which supplies water to the City of Napa. The anticipated annual pumping of 69 million gallons of water for vineyard irrigation could have threatened the water supply of the community of Circle Oaks.

Since Walt Ranch actually comprises 32 separate parcels, there was the possibility to develop small “gentlemen’s vineyards” spread over the parcels to be sold off individually, for wealthy parties to build ridge-side McMansions, fulfilling their fantasies of wine-country chic. The Halls had already implemented a similar plan in Sonoma County.

Community members organized en masse, filing comments, raising money, hiring experts, demonstrating, and spreading the word. Sierra Club partnered with the nationally renowned Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) to challenge the project’s Environmental Impact Report (EIR), with the hiring of experts, raising money, and submitting comments to local officials. When the disputed EIR was accepted, Sierra Club reluctantly filed a lawsuit in partnership with CBD. We were not alone: local environmental non-profit ICARE, and the Circle Oaks Water District and Circle Oaks Homes Association also filed separate lawsuits.

Thankfully, Sierra Club’s lawsuit prevailed on a major issue: the lack of adequate accounting and mitigation for the greenhouse gas emissions which would result from the wholesale destruction of so much woodland. A revised EIR was approved with some strengthened mitigations, and the project plans moved ahead, though by now cut back by about 50 percent: only approximately 14,000 trees over 200 acres would be destroyed. We got half a loaf, not the whole.

As a side note, Walt Ranch also spawned the controversy over Supervisor Alfredo Pedroza’s failure to disclose the purchase of land bordering Walt Ranch, land which could be expected to go up in value if the Walt Ranch Project succeeded. Pedroza did not recuse himself from Walt Ranch votes until this transaction was publicized.

We believe our environmental activism helped to depress the potential profit of Walt Ranch by decreasing the



project acreage, adding costly greenhouse gas mitigations, and imposing delays and legal fees.

What else was achieved by our campaign to save Walt Ranch?

At the very least, potential developers of Napa's hillside watersheds were put on notice that environmentally unsound projects would face vigorous, expensive and prolonged opposition, resulting in delayed and diminished profits, and bad press. Developers were also reminded of the need to consult with the community early in their process to address concerns.

We educated people that Napa Valley groundwater supplies depend on accumulation of runoff (via creeks and underground) from our hillsides. Our oak woodlands gather, store, and gradually release water to the valley, which our residents and farms rely on.

Finally, our understanding was broadened that fighting climate change is not only a matter of defending the Amazon or coral reefs, but taking care of our own back yards.

— Nancy Tamarisk, Napa Group

## Ongoing efforts to curb sprawl at Sonoma Developmental Center in Glen Ellen

The Sonoma Developmental Center is a 945-acre state property that was closed and designated as surplus land in 2018 after serving people with developmental disabilities for more than a century. The site consists of a 180-acre historic campus and 765 acres of open space, containing a major wildlife corridor for mountain lions, bears and other species. It is home to endangered salmon species that swim and spawn in Sonoma Creek, which runs through the campus. The SDC lands are a strong match for designation under the state's 30 X 30 Initiative.

Sierra Club Redwood Chapter and Sonoma Group have recommended these lands as priorities to the Sierra Club California 30x30 Task Force.

Yet, despite nearly four years of county planning and hundreds of written and in person public comments critical of the EIR and Specific Plan, many submitted by Redwood Chapter and Sonoma Group activists, the



The Sonoma Developmental Center near Glen Ellen has been at the center of a controversial proposal by the County of Sonoma to develop the land into a housing development. Opponents are uneasy with the impact the development will have on wildlife as well as traffic and historic preservation.

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors voted to approve the Site Specific plan and EIR during its Dec. 16, 2022 meeting.

A few months ago, two community advocacy organizations, calling the plan "a short-sighted plan with serious environmental consequences," filed suit requesting Sonoma County revise the environmental impact report (EIR) for the SDC Specific Plan and scale back proposed redevelopment of the former Sonoma Developmental Center campus. The lawsuit's goal is to require the county to revise the EIR to address critical environmental issues and provide accurate analyses for appropriate mitigations. According to the plaintiffs, the current EIR is incomplete and deeply flawed.

Some positive news was recently announced that thanks to a line item in the state budget by Sen. Mike McGuire, the 750 acres of open space will be transferred to state parks for permanent protection. The transfer will be final once the budget is approved this year.

Activist Janis Watkins, a board member of Sonoma County Conservation Action, said the issue is about protection of wildlife habitat and open space and a better understanding of the needs of the species that occupy the land. It is also about historic preservation.

"We seek to preserve the land's unique sense of place and history rather than sacrificing too much to generic development," she said. "I think there are various pathways to better protect this land, and they should be considered!"

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# Development threats on open space continue to come across the region

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## Mare Island on Watch

Last summer, a developer called the Nimitz Group unveiled plans to build on Mare Island and encroach upon the open space and wildlife habitat that exists there.

The 157-acre development plan has been green lighted by the City of Vallejo despite causing great concern to Sierra Club Solano Group because of the plan to build luxury housing while destroying some of Vallejo's only remaining open space.

According to Solano Group leader Joe Feller, what is most concerning with this development is the impact it will likely have on existing open space, access to that space, and how the wildlife corridors utilize



Preservation of open space and wildlife habitat at Mare Island is a main focus of Solano Group's current work, as development looms.

this land, in addition to the massive impact the stated new housing units for 70,000 people (not low income) will have on the existing transportation corridors.

Feller said: "This all works against the state's goal to preserve 30 percent of California's land by 2030 in its 30x30 initiative. At one point, we must ask the question, when is it enough and when will higher authorities beyond the City of Vallejo put the brakes on this self-serving development?"

Most recently, the developer produced another map of Mare Island, which now calls the former golf course "Bunker Hills" instead of its current designation as "Parks Recreation and Open Space."

Solano Group activists are following this project closely.

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## Forest Committee members learn stewardship methods

In February, members of the Redwood Chapter Northern California Forest Committee participated in an educational site visit to the western Sonoma County 70-acre Wildlands Preserve. It serves as Occidental Arts & Ecology Center's (OAEC) living learnscape for stewardship and wildtending methods that integrate traditional knowledge with modern science.

The goals for land management are simple, yet bold: strive to create conditions conducive to life, and to return people to this place as an interconnected and regenerative component of a thriving landscape. Various strategies help achieve these goals, such as mowing, grazing, controlled burning, thinning and limbing vegetation management, waterway stuffing, contour carbon catching, saving and sowing native grass seed, all the while creating more resilient wildlife habitat.

A short walk in the "backcountry" led the group through a number of native plant communities representative of California's diversity—from

coastal prairie grasslands, to chaparral slopes of coyote brush and poison oak, through groves of hardwood mixed oaks, madrone & California bay into moist Douglas fir and redwood forest stands.

OAEC has created a stewardship plan, which outlines strategies for "mending the wild," and is dedicated to repairing a damaged ecosystem out of balance, and strive towards the vision of "tending the wild"—with humans returning to their role as regenerative disturbers of an ecosystem that supports life.

With forest health & fire resilience work, OAEC's Wildlands team especially focuses on restoring a number of eroding ephemeral (Class III) watercourses that run through the OAEC property. During the rainy season, these channels deliver sediment downstream to Dutch Bill Creek, one of the most critical watersheds in the Russian River basin for the recovery of endangered coho salmon and threatened steelhead trout.

Gullies also effectively dehydrate the adjacent landscape by draining

shallow groundwater to their low points, just like pulling the drain out of a bathtub.

One way of stabilizing and repairing gullies is to strategically infill them with the excess fuel load materials generated through defensible space vegetation management projects in order to slow the flow and distribute the energy of water, trap soil and leaf litter particles, sequester carbon, and ultimately arrest sediment delivery downstream.

With various limbing and thinning projects underway, OAEC recognized the opportunity to stack functions and use the abundance of resulting material onsite to stuff eroding waterways and gullies! Thus OAEC "Fuels to Flows" projects recognize that "Slash is not Trash, but Beneficial Biomass" towards a more integrated and holistic restoration suite of principle and practices which recognize that "It's time to take our fire fears and connect that with our water woes!"

You are welcome to contact OAEC for volunteer support!

—Brock Dolman, OAEC Wildlands Program Co-Coordinator

# Sonoma Supes OK ban on new gas stations countywide, first in nation

On March 14, Sonoma County became the first county in the nation to permanently prohibit the construction of new retail gasoline and diesel fueling stations and to prohibit the expansion of fossil fueling infrastructure at existing ones. The ordinance applies to the unincorporated area of the county, by far the largest part of the county by land area.

The supervisors voted by 3 to 2 in favor of the resolution, ordinance and zoning text amendments before them.

At the last minute, Sup. Lynda Hopkins requested the inclusion of a prohibition on a non-retail 12,000-gallon fuel tank to serve rental vehicle fleets at the Sonoma County Airport.

In September 2019, Sonoma County adopted a climate emergency declaration acknowledging the global climate crisis and pledging to act in response. Two years later, the Regional Climate Protection Authority adopted a resolution urging the county and all cities in the county to adopt prohibitions on new gas stations.

In March 2021, after a long controversy surrounding a new Safeway gas station, Petaluma became the first city in the nation to prohibit new gas stations. The cities of Rohnert Park, Sebastopol, Cotati, Santa Rosa and Windsor have also enacted their own ordinances. The cities of Healdsburg, Sonoma and Cloverdale have yet to take action.

There are approximately 158 gas stations throughout the county, mainly concentrated along major highways, with 46 in the unincorporated county. The County's staff report found that there are many negative impacts to air, surface and groundwater quality, soils, and human health from pollution due to leaks and spills from gas stations, resulting in costly clean up. Sonoma County is riddled with leaking underground storage tanks.

Even with strong regulation, gasoline stations pose a burden to local communities as evidenced in the recent article in the *Press Democrat* about 14 gas stations in the state being fined \$1.7 million for violations, two of

which are located in Sonoma County.

"Preventing new gas stations in the unincorporated county is just one of the tools we need to employ to reach our climate goals," said Sup. Chris Coursey, chair of the Board of Supervisors. "Over the past few years Sonoma County has been buffeted by the consequences of climate change, which in turn, is the consequence of

burning fossil fuel. The unprecedented wildfires and the whiplash of extreme heat and drought alternating with the flooding and calamity caused by atmospheric rivers and bomb cyclones is a clear indicator that all levels of government have a role to play in taking meaningful action."

Woody Hastings, co-coordinator of the Sonoma County community-based group Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations (CONGAS)

that has been leading the effort in the County, said that "Some have argued that this action is merely symbolic or "feel-good," has no material effect, and is a waste of city and county staff time. Based on our experience of battling new gas station proposals, we assert otherwise. There are currently at least two active new gasoline station proposals in Sonoma County. These, and the proposals CONGAS has already successfully opposed, are not symbolic. Ceasing to expand fossil fuel infrastructure in the face of a climate crisis is not symbolic."

Jenny Blaker, co-coordinator of CONGAS, explained that the group's motivation is not based on the climate crisis or local environmental impacts alone.

"In addition to the climate crisis and local impacts, CONGAS sees this as an environmental justice issue. In every drop of gasoline we pump, there is a wake of destruction—from the drilling to the pumping to the transportation by rail, trucks, and pipelines to processing facilities and refineries—almost always disproportionately impacting indigenous, low income, and communities of color.

"Taking this action frees up staff time to work on other climate-smart measures in the county, such as efforts to improve walking and biking amenities, expand clean-emission public transit, and develop electric vehicle charging infrastructure."

**"The unprecedented wildfires and the whiplash of extreme heat and drought alternating with the flooding and calamity caused by atmospheric rivers and bomb cyclones is a clear indicator that all levels of government have a role to play in taking meaningful action."**

**— Sup. Chris Coursey**

# Redwood Needles

## Sierra Club

### Redwood Chapter

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## Volunteer with Us!

### MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT CHAIR

Be the friendly face that introduces new members and volunteers to Redwood Chapter. This is a key position within the chapter to help it grow and maintain an engaged and active member and volunteer base. Responsibilities include: creating a calendar for member engagement activities, carrying out social events for members and volunteers, recruiting and leading a member engagement team to help plan activities, welcoming new members, recruiting and tracking new members. *Estimated Time Commitment: 10 hours a month.*

### OUTINGS LEADERS

Do you love the outdoors? Do you love sharing your love of the outdoors with others? Outings leaders are an integral part of Sierra Club, as they welcome people from all backgrounds into an outdoor adventure. Redwood Chapter is located in an incredible landscape with so many places to enjoy and explore. But chapter outings don't have to be confined to our region. You can lead groups on hikes, paddles, camping trips and more! Sierra Club provides the training, you provide the inspiration and leadership. To learn more about becoming an outings leader, please visit <https://www.sierraclub.org/redwood/outings-leaderappandresources> *Estimated Time Commitment: 5 hours a month.*

### OUTINGS CHAIR

Provide leadership, direction and oversight to the chapter and group outings programs. Work to make outdoor activities an integrated and vital element of chapter efforts. Responsibilities include ensuring all chapter and group outings follow Club policies and procedures, managing and minimizing the risks of local outings programs, maintaining training and First-Aid certification requirements for outings leaders, and ensuring active leaders meet these requirements. *Estimated Time Commitment: 10-15 hours a month.*

*Redwood Chapter welcomes volunteers who are passionate about local environmental issues and want to help. There are lots of ways for you to plug in, and we would love to have you! E-mail [redwood.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:redwood.chapter@sierraclub.org)*

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