

Forest Legacy Project

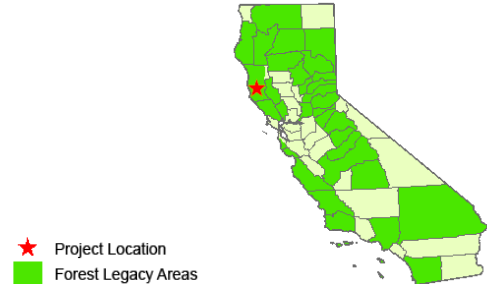
Weger Working Forest Conservation Easement

Ukiah, Mendocino County, California



FUNDING HISTORY

FY 2023 Forest Legacy Program Funding	\$3,502,500
FY 2023 Non-Federal Cost Share	\$1,167,500
FY 2023 Project Costs	\$4,670,000
FY 2023 Project Acres	1,580
Forest Legacy Funding To Date	\$0
Total Project Costs	\$4,670,000
Total Project Acres	1,580



Tract Name	Size (ac)	Tract Cost	FLP Funding	Non-Fed Cost Share	Status
Weger Working Forest	1,580	\$4,670,000	\$3,502,500	\$1,167,500	Draft 2023

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Save the Redwoods League (League), in partnership with the landowners of the Weger Working Forest, respectfully submit this proposal to the Forest Legacy Program to protect, via a conservation easement, an ecologically significant working forest in Mendocino County that is threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The subject property (Weger South) is part of the larger Weger ownership that consists of a total of 3,862 acres. The property has been owned and managed by the Weger family for generations. The larger property includes three separate conservation easements: Orr Springs (~730 acres), Weger North (~1,552 acres), and Weger South (~1,580 acres). The League expects to acquire two of the easements, Orr Springs and Weger North, in December 2022, and the remaining easement, Weger South, in 2023 or 2024, pending timing of LWCF funds, if awarded. The easements will be managed together as a single, sustainably managed, highly productive redwood and mixed conifer working forest. The west coast of the U.S. is the only place in the world where coastal redwood forest such as this exists. Being the largest non-industrial ownership in the Big River watershed, its protection is of regional and statewide importance.



Weger Working Forest, looking northeast (Photo by Adrianna Andreucci, SRL)

PROJECT FEATURES

Important

- **THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT:** The Project protects Class I creeks that provide spawning habitat for ESA-listed salmonids. NMFS recovery plans (2012, 2016) rank the Big River watershed as high-priority habitat for coho and as essential habitat for Chinook and steelhead.
- The California Natural Diversity Database documents the observation of the American peregrine falcon (Federal Endangered) on the larger Weger Working Forest property and Foothill yellow-legged frog (Federal Species of Concern) within a one-mile buffer of the property.

- According to CDFW's dataset, there are two known Northern spotted owl nesting sites and five activity centers within a one-mile buffer of the property and 11 positive observations in the area between 1992-2013. The landowners are finalizing a Northern Spotted Owl Safe Harbor Agreement with USFWS.
- The Weger Forest Management Plan and Mineral Remoteness Assessment document Federal Threatened or Protected species as having moderate or high potential to be within the project area including bald eagle, Northern goshawk, and golden eagle (winter nesting).
- FISH, WILDLIFE, PLANTS, AND UNIQUE FOREST COMMUNITIES: The property contains individual old-growth and late-seral (100+ years) redwood and Douglas fir trees that are critical habitat for the Northern spotted owl in one of the world's most iconic ecosystems--the coast redwood forest.
- The Project also buffers approximately 300 acres of old-growth redwoods at Montgomery Woods. It protects two Class I streams totaling approximately 1.75 miles that spawn steelhead, coho, and Chinook. It also enhances wildlife connectivity across a protected landscape of more than 11,500 acres.
- WATER SUPPLY, AQUATIC HABITAT, AND WATERSHED PROTECTION: The property is located within the Big River watershed, which provides drinking water to the Town of Mendocino. By avoiding development and the associated pollution, the Project protects the water supply, water quality, and watershed health.
- The property includes important riparian areas: a small portion of the South Fork Big River and the headwaters of two Class I creeks (Soda Creek and Gates Creek). The creeks provide documented spawning habitat for coho, Chinook, and steelhead, all listed as threatened under the ESA.
- The Big River watershed is on the 303(d) List due to impairment and/or threat of impairment to water quality by sediment and temperature negatively impacting salmonids. By avoiding development, the Project prevents additional sediment from being added into the watershed, improving water quality.
- The Project avoids fragmentation in a Critical Coastal Area, reduces human-caused wildfire risk, and ensures the protection of carbon sequestration potential. It prohibits harvest of any residual old-growth redwood and Douglas fir trees and includes two Late Seral Reserves (10.1 acres in total).
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM TIMBER: The landowners have practiced sustainable forest management for over 20 years as documented in the 2009 Weger Forest Management Plan and two NTMPs (2000 and 2003).
- The landowners harvest approximately 600,000 - 700,000 MBF per year, employing 10 people and two trucks per day for 2-3 months a year and expending a total of \$250,00 - \$350,000 annually on forestry, logging, road work, trucking, maintenance, and associated costs, all within the Mendocino region.
- They intentionally harvest annually and distribute logs across local mills to support the local economy. Conservation easements require the property to continue to be managed in a manner that increases forest inventory and ensures long-term, sustained-yield production of quality forest products.
- The property contains highly productive soils (redwood site index of 109-157 and Douglas fir site index of 97-168) and soil complexes that support commercial quality timber, including the Ornbaun-Zeni complex, which is the most productive timber soil complex and underlies most of the property.
- ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM NON-TIMBER PRODUCTS: A working cattle ranch exists on the property's grasslands (about 40 cattle) which contributes an estimated \$60K-\$70K of annual revenue to the local economy. Limited vineyard development will be allowed within the Agricultural Preserve footprints.
- PUBLIC ACCESS: While the conservation easement will not provide open public access, the landowners agree to host guided tours for the public semi-annually, and the property will be available for educational opportunities focused on sustainable forestry and conservation.



Mature redwoods in Soda Creek drainage
(Photo by Adrianna Andreucci, SRL)

- **SCENIC RESOURCES:** The property is located between State Route (SR) 20 and SR 128, both listed as eligible scenic highways by the California Department of Transportation. The property is visually important to local citizens and visitors to the region as a forested backdrop along Orr Springs Road.
- The property creates a buffer for beautiful, towering old-growth redwoods in the adjacent Montgomery Woods. The County's General Plan defines scenic resource to include unique natural areas and rural-open grasslands. By any standard, the property's scenic beauty is unparalleled.
- **CULTURAL/TRIBAL/HISTORIC:** The Big River watershed is located within the historic territory of the Northern Pomo, who were most likely the original inhabitants of the property. The property includes the site of a historic splash dam along Soda Creek that was built in 1892.
- The property's historic splash dam is part of an important chapter in the history of both the County and the timber harvesting industry. Following old-growth logging at the turn of the century redwood split products were made on the property from the 1920s through World War II and up until 1963.

Threatened

- The Weger Working Forest is under direct development threat to become 11 estate homes due to the following factors:
- **LACK OF PROTECTION:** The Project is designated a mix of Forestland (FL) and Rangeland (RL) in the General Plan. Zoning for the site is primarily Timberland Production District (TP) and Rangeland (RL), with 11 legal parcels and Certificates of Compliance.
- One small area is zoned Forestland (FL). If sold to a developer, the property could be developed into 11 estate homes. There is also a threat of conversion to vineyard and cannabis production. Multiple active cannabis operations are adjacent to and visible from the Project.
- **LANDOWNER CIRCUMSTANCES:** The landowners are committed to long-term sustainable forestry practices and care deeply for their forest. A core motivation for pursuing the easement is protecting the longstanding legacy of sustainable forestry they have invested in on this property since the 1990s.
- It is anticipated that once the current landowner passes, the property will be split between the two heirs. The conservation easement provides long-term protection of the property regardless of future landowner circumstances.
- **ADJACENT LAND USES:** The property's neighbors include Mendocino Redwood Company, Montgomery Woods, BLM-owned lands, and private landowners. The largest ownerships in the Big River watershed include timber companies and CAL FIRE; Weger Working Forest is the largest non-industrial private ownership.
- In recent years nearby 4,000-5,000-acre ranches were subdivided into 160-acre parcels, showing the conversion threat. Currently, Bay Area workers are flooding rural areas and the County has a residential property shortage, both driving up home prices. A nearby 40-acre parcel recently sold for \$300K.
- Rural residential subdivisions and vineyard/cannabis conversions are increasingly common. Two cannabis operations are visible from the Project, and an adjacent property has had multiple cannabis encroachments. Illegal cannabis grows have also been found on the subject property in years past.
- **ABILITY TO DEVELOP:** The property has direct access from Orr Springs Road and buildable ground, and septic and solar infrastructure could easily be developed. Additionally, there are at least seven developed springs.
- The conservation easement allows for the existing home to be expanded from 1,000 square feet to 5,000 square feet. Without the easement, 11 new estate homes and associated infrastructure could be built, entirely transforming and fragmenting the landscape.



Scattered old growth redwoods are found within the Weger Working Forest (Photo by Adrianna Andreucci, SRL)

Strategic

- **CONSERVATION INITIATIVE:** Weger South is part of the larger conservation initiative to protect the entire Weger Working Forest, consisting of approximately 3,862 total acres, the largest nonindustrial ownership in the Big River watershed and thus of regional and statewide importance.
- **CONSERVATION PLANS:** The Project supports the 2018 California Forest Carbon Plan's goal to increase the acreage of forestland protected by CEs by 10 % with a focus on areas that are threatened by development and can effectively sequester and store carbon while supporting forest ecosystem benefits.
- It aligns with the California 2030 Natural and Working Lands Climate Change Implementation Plan's objective to increase and improve conservation of California's natural and working land and its vision to protect land from conversion to more intensified uses by increasing conservation incentives.
- It supports the goal of the 2021 California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan to conserve working forests by funding working conservation easements. It also supports Action 1.40 because it helps the landowners conserve Northern spotted owls and implement the Safe Harbor Agreement.
- It supports several of the 2018 Safeguarding California Plan's strategies for climate change resilience, such as protecting forested lands from conversion to non-forest uses. It also avoids development and habitat fragmentation, preventing forested lands from being converted to commercial uses.
- The Project advances the 2016 California Water Action Plan's goals by protecting important lands within the Big River watershed and ensuring that conversion of these lands does not have a negative impact on water resources.
- The 2015 California State Wildlife Action Plan identifies Northern California Coast Redwoods as a priority conservation target, and the Project protects old-growth and late-seral (100+ years) redwoods and provides a buffer to old-growth redwoods in the adjoining Montgomery Woods.
- The Project supports the goals of three NOAA recovery plans: the 2004 and 2012 plans for coho salmon and the 2016 plan for Chinook salmon and steelhead. It also supports the 2011 USFWS Northern Spotted Owl Recovery Plan's strategy of preserving late-successional habitat in actively managed forests.
- **PROTECTED LANDS:** The Project provides a critical buffer to the old-growth redwood island on the southern boundary of the adjacent Montgomery Woods. As detailed in the League's 2018 State of the Redwoods Conservation Report, there is substantial need to sufficiently buffer the remaining old-growth.
- It is also adjacent to over 1,000 acres of BLM lands and the 3,631-acre Leonard Lake Reserve CE. In combination, along with the larger Weger Working Forest property, and other pending League fee purchases (533 acres), the Project creates habitat connectivity across more than 11,500 protected acres.



Panoramic view from Wellman Point, the highest point of the Weger Working Forest (Photo by Adrianna Andreucci, SRL)

Readiness

Pre-Appraisal/Market Analysis	1
Easement or Fee Conditions	1
Non-Federal Cost Share Commitment	1
Signed Purchase Agreement	0
Title Search	1
Mineral Determination	1
Stewardship Plan (or equivalent)*	1
Readiness Total Tally Score	6

Supporting Parties

Jared Huffman, Member of the United States Congress, 2nd District; Jim Wood, Member of State of California Legislature, 2nd District; Mike McGuire, Member of State of California Legislature, 2nd District; Terry Bertels, District Superintendent, California Dept. of Parks & Recreation; Molly Brown, Field Manager, Bureau of Land Management; National Resource Conservation Service; and California Land Stewardship Institute.

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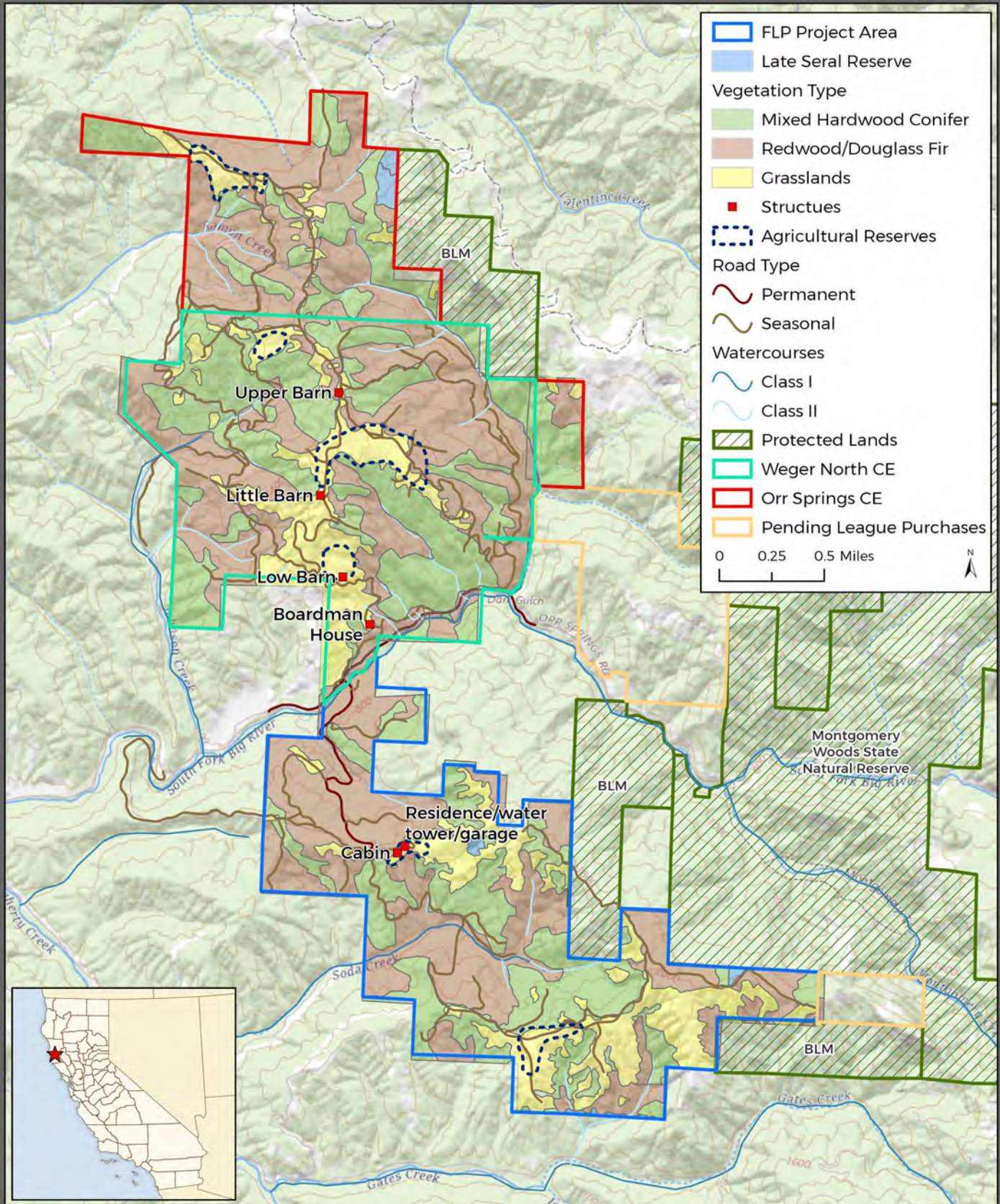
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WEGER WORKING FOREST CONSERVATION EASEMENT PROJECT BOUNDARIES MAP

Save The Redwoods

L E A G U E



Property boundary does not align with vegetation type boundaries due to parcel data discrepancies.

Map produced by Save the Redwoods League
July 2021 using ESRI software