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Largest Ever Land Back-Conservation Deal in Calif. Now Complete: Western Rivers Conservancy Conveys Final Acreage to Yurok Tribe in a 47,000-Acre Effort Critical to the Salmon, Wildlife and Forests of the Klamath River

*Totaling 73 square miles, Blue Creek project marks milestone for Klamath River
and Tribal sovereignty, more than doubling Tribe's land holdings*



Blue Creek flows into the Klamath River. Photo: Peter Marbach/Western Rivers Conservancy

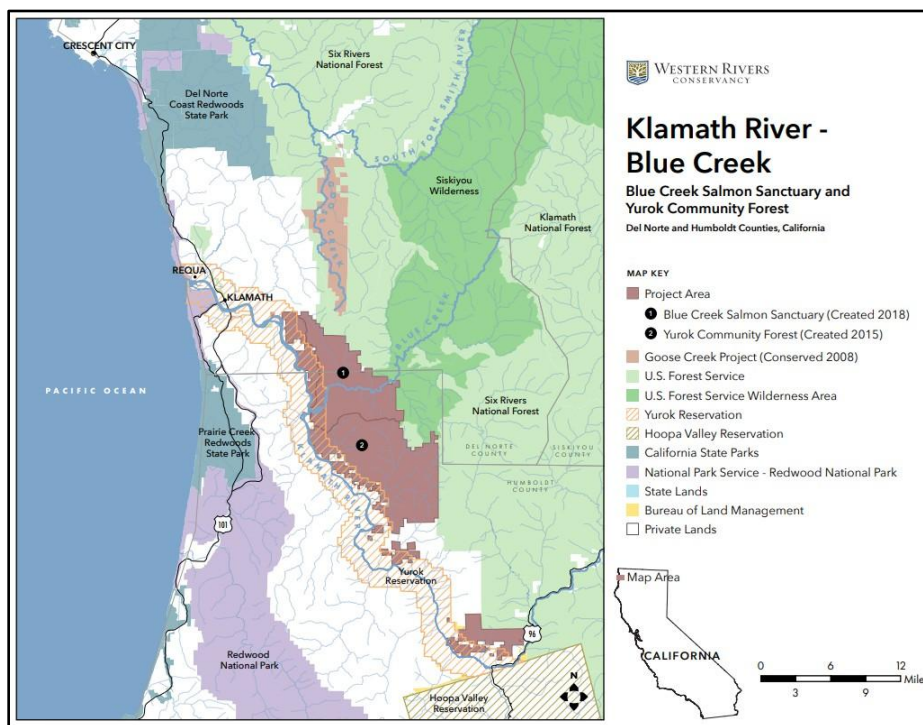
KLAMATH, Calif. (June 5, 2025) — Today, [Western Rivers Conservancy](#) (WRC), [the Yurok Tribe](#), the [California Wildlife Conservation Board](#) (WCB) and the [California State Coastal Conservancy](#) (CSCC) announce completion of the largest single “land back” deal in California history, marking a milestone achievement for conservation and Tribal sovereignty. The 73 square miles of land along the eastern side of the lower Klamath River are now owned and managed by the Yurok Tribe as the **Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary and Yurok Tribal Community Forest**. (See map below.) Establishing Tribal ownership safeguards the long-term health of this critical ecosystem and culturally significant sites along the

Klamath, which is home to one of the most important fall Chinook salmon runs on the West Coast. The conveyance of these lands to the Tribe has more than doubled the Tribe's land holdings; both California state agencies provided crucial funding to enable this transfer of ownership.

"On behalf of the Yurok people, I want to sincerely thank Western Rivers Conservancy for their longtime partnership and commitment to return a major part of our homeland. The impact of this project is enormous," said **Joseph L. James**, the chairman of the Yurok Tribe. "In working together for over two decades establishing the Community Forest and Salmon Sanctuary, we are forging a sustainable future for the fish, forests and our people that honors both ecological integrity and our cultural heritage."

The 47,097 acres of ancestral lands, located in the lower Klamath River watershed, play a crucial role in improving the health of Blue Creek, which carries great spiritual significance for the Yurok Tribe and is a crucial cold-water lifeline to the fish of the Klamath River. The forests, river lands and prairies they contain provide habitat for numerous imperiled species, including coho and Chinook salmon, marbled murrelet, northern spotted owl and Humboldt marten. Blue Creek serves as a vital cold-water refuge for salmon, steelhead and other fish in an era of climate change.

Nelson Mathews, president of Western Rivers Conservancy, emphasized the broader environmental benefits of this achievement: "This project exemplifies the power of partnership, showcasing how conservation efforts and the land back movement can come together to benefit the rivers, fish, wildlife and people of an entire landscape. After more than 20 years of close collaboration with the Yurok Tribe, we have together achieved this magnificent conservation success while ensuring these lands and waters are in the hands of those most deeply committed to their future health and sustainable use. Blue Creek and its watershed are critical to the health of the entire Klamath fishery. The Yurok Tribe has the resources and the deep cultural connections that sustained this land for millennia, and now they can continue to do so."



About the Blue Creek Project

Today's announcement marks the completion of Western Rivers Conservancy's 23-year effort to convey 47,097 acres of critical lands along the Klamath River and encompassing the lower Blue Creek watershed, including their confluence, to the Yurok Tribe. From 2009 through 2017, WRC acquired or facilitated transfer of the lands from Green Diamond Resource Company in multiple phases; conveyance of the lands from WRC to the Yurok has happened in multiple phases as well. The conveyance of the final 14,968 acres from WRC to the Yurok Tribe closed on May 30, 2025.

The historic 47,097-acre land transfer, at a purchase price of \$56 million, encompasses the entire lower half of the Blue Creek watershed, 25 miles of the eastern bank of the Klamath River and dozens of miles of smaller salmon-bearing tributary streams, including Blue Creek, Bear Creek, Pecwan Creek and Ke'Pel Creek. The lands were owned and managed as commercial timberland by Green Diamond and its predecessor Simpson Logging Company for nearly 100 years. These lands are the ancestral homelands of the Yurok Tribe, who have lived along the Klamath River and depended on its salmon since time immemorial. This collaboration between a nonprofit conservation organization and a Native American Tribe reflects the growing intersectional movement between land back and environmental stewardship in the United States.

To pay for the project, WRC pieced together an innovative funding strategy that brought together \$56 million in private capital, low interest loans, tax credits and carbon credit sales. Of that, only \$8 million was through direct public grants. The private funding included traditional sources, such as gifts from private foundations, corporations and philanthropic individuals, as well as nontraditional sources like the sale of carbon credits, which will continue to support the project, and capital generated through the [New Markets Tax Credit program](#) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

In addition to raising the funds to purchase the land, WRC will also transfer \$3.3 million generated through the sale of carbon credits to the Yurok Tribe to be used for future stewardship of the property. When project costs are included, the full value of the Blue Creek conveyance is over \$70 million.

A New Salmon Sanctuary and Tribal Community Forest

Conveyance of the final lands from WRC to the Yurok Tribe completes the **Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary**, a 14,790-acre cold-water refuge surrounded by forest lands that will now be managed for forest complexity and old-growth health for the benefit of the Klamath River's fish and wildlife. The entirety of Blue Creek is now permanently protected, from its headwaters and upper reaches in the Siskiyou Wilderness to its confluence with the Klamath River.

Located 16 miles upstream from the mouth of the Klamath, Blue Creek provides the first cold-water refuge in the river for migrating salmon and steelhead, allowing summer and fall-run fish to lower their body temperatures enough to survive their long journey to upstream spawning grounds. Blue Creek is thus an essential component of the overall health of the Klamath River and the entirety of its salmon runs, especially as the removal of all the Klamath dams has reopened vast spawning habitat in the upper river.

The other 32,307 acres of redwood and mixed conifer forest outside the Salmon Sanctuary now constitute the **Yurok Tribal Community Forest**. Already more than a decade in the making, the forest is being allowed to recover from nearly a century of industrial logging that left both the forest and the streams in need of extensive restoration. The Tribe's sustainable forestry practices are focused on putting the Yurok Community Forest on a path to become more diverse and mature by increasing the

time between harvests. The Community Forest provides jobs for Tribal members in forestry and restoration, helping build the future for the Yurok people. It also helps mitigate the effects of climate change. [Recent research](#) has demonstrated that redwood forests can store more carbon per acre than any other type of forest and that [second-growth \(previously logged\) redwood forests](#) have the greatest potential to accumulate carbon even faster than old-growth trees.

From 2013 until present, WRC worked in a formal co-management agreement with the Yurok Tribe to conduct the necessary planning and implementation for forest restoration and management, aquatic restoration, logging road removal and preparations for the final conveyance of land. This agreement served to build capacity and expertise for both WRC and the Yurok, as they collaborated to meet grant requirements, finalize the management plan and initiate on-the-ground restoration projects and chart the future of both the Salmon Sanctuary and the Community Forest.

Western Rivers Conservancy and the Yurok Tribe's Shared Vision for Blue Creek

WRC and the Yurok Tribe's shared vision has been to create a sustainable and inclusive model of land management that prioritizes Blue Creek and the Klamath River and honors both ecological integrity and cultural heritage. The project's outcomes benefit both land conservation and cultural repatriation.

"Everyone has a vested interest in seeing the Klamath salmon runs survive and thrive," said WRC President Emerita and co-founder **Sue Doroff**, who launched the Blue Creek project and oversaw it until her retirement in June 2024. "Millions of dollars and immeasurable human energy are being invested in the Klamath River right now. There are two things that are key to the success of this massive effort to save this river and its salmon: Blue Creek and the Yurok people. I am honored beyond words to have worked together with the Yurok to ensure the Klamath and its fish and wildlife will have a salmon sanctuary and cold water refuge where they need it most."

The Klamath River is in prolonged recovery from more than a century of logging, dams, gold mining and other human activities. In August 2024, the last three of four dams were removed from the upper Klamath River. Initiated by Klamath Basin tribes, the removal of these dams reopened more than 400 miles of salmon habitat in the upper river for the first time in over a century.

"The dams were the single biggest impediment to salmon production on the Klamath because they had such a negative influence on the river ecosystem. Through dam removal, protection and restoration of critical tributaries like Blue Creek and proper water management, we will restore the fish runs that sustained us and this entire region," said **Barry McCovey**, director of the Yurok Fisheries Department, which employs nearly 100 scientists and technicians.

Western Rivers Conservancy – A Leader in Land Back

For more than 30 years, WRC has taken the lead in marrying conservation and tribal land-return outcomes, working with tribal nations to permanently protect rivers and the lands that sustain them. WRC and its many tribal partners, who are the original stewards of riverlands across the West, make natural conservation partners given that tribal nations often possess the resources, foresight, expertise and commitment to restore and conserve these vital places in perpetuity. Most recently, [WRC conveyed 327 acres](#) of the Little Sur River and surrounding ancestral redwood forest to the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County along California's central coast. A complete list and history of WRC's Tribal Nations partnerships are available [here](#).

Project Funding

State funding and support for the Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary and Yurok Tribal Community Forest was provided by the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB), California State Coastal Conservancy (CSCC), California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the California Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program.

“Returning these lands to the Yurok Tribe is an unprecedented step forward for the Klamath River, and it comes at a critical moment following the removal of the Klamath River dams. Returning ancestral lands to Native American tribes is an essential step in restoring ecological balance and health,” said **Jennifer Norris**, executive director of the California Wildlife Conservation Board. “WCB is proud to be part of this truly historic achievement, both for the Yurok people and as part of the broader effort to guarantee the long-term survival of the Klamath’s salmon and the wildlife of Northern California.”

“Thanks to this incredible group of partners, the Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary and Yurok Tribal Community Forest have become one of California’s great conservation successes—one that will nurture tribal resilience for the Yurok people, improve conditions for the Klamath River’s salmon and wildlife and carry forward the Coastal Conservancy’s mission of improving climate resilience on the California Coast,” said **Amy Hutzel**, executive officer of the California State Coastal Conservancy.

Additional support came from Compton Foundation, Lisa and Douglas Goldman Fund, George F. Jewett Foundation, The Kendeda Fund, Giles W. and Elise G. Mead Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation/Acres for America and Walmart Stores, Inc., Natural Resources Conservation Service, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Land-Sea Connection program of Resources Legacy Fund made possible by the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Inc., U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Weeden Foundation and The Wyss Foundation.

Please visit the [Klamath River/Blue Creek project web page](#) for additional information on this historic achievement, including a complete list of project funders and funding details.

Note to media: Hi-res images and b-roll are available [here](#).



The Yurok Tribe

With more than 6,400 enrolled members, the Yurok Tribe is currently the largest Tribe in California. Yurok ancestral territory comprises 7.5 percent of the California coastline, extending from the Little River in Humboldt County to Damnation Creek in Del Norte County. The eastern boundary is the Klamath River’s confluence with the Trinity River. The Tribe’s more than 500 employees provide numerous services to the local community. The Tribe’s major initiatives include holistic forest management, fisheries protection, restoration and management, Klamath dam removal, condor reintroduction, natural resources conservation, cultural preservation, sustainable economic development and land acquisition. More information at yuroktribe.org.



Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy's motto is "Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it." WRC purchases land along the West's finest rivers and streams to conserve habitat for fish and wildlife, protect key sources of cold water and create public access for all to enjoy. To ensure the lands it acquires are protected in perpetuity, WRC transfers them to long-term stewards such as federal, state and regional agencies and Tribal Nations. WRC has created sanctuaries for fish and wildlife and secured recreational access along 250 rivers and streams around the West. It has protected more than 440 river miles and over 225,000 acres of land in nine western states. Its approach to river conservation is effective, tangible and permanent. More information at westernrivers.org.



Wildlife Conservation Board

The Wildlife Conservation Board protects, restores and enhances California's spectacular natural resources for wildlife and for the public's use and enjoyment in partnership with conservation groups, government agencies and the people of California. Originally created within the California Department of Natural Resources and later placed with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, WCB is a separate and independent Board with authority and funding to carry out an acquisition and development program for wildlife conservation. More information at wcb.ca.gov.



California State Coastal Conservancy

The Coastal Conservancy is a non-regulatory state agency that works with others along the California coast, in coastal watersheds, and in the San Francisco Bay Area to protect and restore coastal resources, to help people get to and enjoy the coast, and to enhance climate resilience. Our vision is of a beautiful, restored, and accessible coast for current and future Californians. More information at scc.ca.gov.

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