

## Case Study: Gualala River Watershed Council

**Watershed:** Gualala River Watershed

**Researcher:** Jeff Borchers

Year	Grant Program	Project Title	Watershed	Award Amount
2011-2014	Department of Conservation Watershed Coordinator Grant	Gualala River Watershed Council Watershed Coordinator	Gualala-Salmon, 18010109	\$220,720 (\$459,197 match)

This case study focuses on a single watershed coordinator grant received by the Gualala River Watershed Council, which included a six-month 2014 Drought Emergency Response Extension. Findings of this research are based on interviews with stakeholders involved and a review of documents associated with the grants.

### Gualala River Watershed<sup>1</sup>

Located on California's north coast, the 298-square-mile Gualala River watershed empties into the Pacific Ocean near the town of Gualala, approximately 115 miles north of San Francisco and 17 miles south of Point Arena. Located in both Sonoma and Mendocino Counties, the watershed is mostly mountainous terrain with elevations ranging from sea level to 2,602 feet. Ninety-five percent of the land is held privately.

Prior to Euro-American settlement, the watershed was occupied by the Kashia (Kashaya) band of Pomo Native Americans. Their descendants are still present in the area, many living in Stewarts Point Rancheria. The primary land use in the basin is privately-held timber production—about 34% of the land area—which has been the case for many decades. The harvest of old-growth redwood dates from 1862, but extensive logging began in the early 1950s and continued into the 1960s. Years of erosion from poor logging practices prompted a Clean Water Act 303(d) listing in 1993 for impairment associated with excessive sediment in the Gualala River. Some 84% of sediment input derives from roads, a prime focus of ongoing mitigation efforts. In 2003, the listing was updated to include excessive water temperature.

Three anadromous fish species are present in the watershed, coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), and Pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*). Coho salmon are listed as endangered in the watershed under both state and federal Endangered Species Acts.

In addition to timber, economic activity in the watershed includes grazing, rural residential development, fruit production, vineyards, and tourism. The watershed's human population is less

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for this section include: Klamt et al. (2002); "Gualala River Overview." (n.d.); "Gualala River | California Northcoast Regional Water Quality Control Board." (n.d.).

than 10,000, with most residences in or near the towns of Gualala and Annapolis. Fort-six percent of land ownerships are in 40 to 5,000 acre parcels.

## **Organizations and Grants**

As a tax-exempt non-profit organization, the Gualala River Watershed Council (GRWC) dates from 2004. However, the organization has its roots in the 1980s when local citizens came together to address declines in salmonid populations in the river. With the Clean Water Act §303(d) listing of the Gualala River in 1993, a local coalition of various groups, agencies, and other stakeholders arose. In 1996, the coalition formally assumed its current name (Gualala River Watershed Council-A, n.d.)

The mission of the GRWC is to “provide an environment for landowners, resource managers, agencies, community organizations and interested citizens to work towards restoring the natural balance of the Gualala River Watershed.” The organization’s list of cooperating partners is diverse, including state and federal resource agencies, local land conservancies, local non-profits, landowners and local businesses.

The GRWC has had a close, long-term partnership with Gualala Redwoods, Inc. (GRI), a local timber company, which, prior to a land sale in 2015, owned 30,000 acres of second-growth redwood forest (Gualala Redwood, Inc., n.d.). In addition to joint stream restoration projects with the GRWC, the company has been instrumental in providing technical and logistical support. Currently, one former employee of GRI sits on the board of directors.

GRWC watershed coordinators also worked closely with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). In the mid-1990s, CAL FIRE provided a grant for a watershed coordinator position and public outreach, and was the “only funding source in the area at the time.”<sup>2</sup> The relationship continued during the grant term (2011-2014), with the coordinator providing support for the creation of small-landowner management plans under the California Forest Improvement Program (CFIP).

Because the GRWC had not yet acquired 501(c)(3) exempt status, it proposed and received the watershed coordinator grant in partnership with the Santa Rosa-based Sonoma Resource Conservation District (SRCD).<sup>3</sup> Each organization fielded a part-time watershed coordinator, but the shared arrangement was abandoned early in the course of the grant because of “unforeseen circumstances” (Gualala River Watershed Council, 2015). In part, the geographic distance between inland Santa Rosa and coastal Gualala became a significant barrier to the SRCD coordinator’s continued involvement. Eventually, a replacement watershed coordinator (referred to here as watershed coordinator B) was hired from a local coalition of private and public land owners to continue public outreach in the southern part of the county.<sup>4,5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Respondent E, pers. comm.

<sup>3</sup> In July 2013, Sotoyome and Southern Sonoma County RCDs merged to become the Sonoma RCD (About Us | Sonoma Resource Conservation District, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> The watershed coordinator grant received by the SRCD is presented as a separate case study within this Department of Conservation study.

## **Watershed Coordinator Grant (2011-2014)**

The 2011-2014 watershed coordinator grant proposal submitted by GRWC listed four main goals for the watershed:

- Goal 1. Improve water quality and quantity and work towards the attainment goals of the TMDL.
- Goal 2. Understand and monitor the health of the watershed by implementing programs that use sound scientific methods.
- Goal 3. Build the capacity of the GRWC to enable long-term organizational and funding stability, sustainability and success.
- Goal 4. Encourage stewardship of the natural resources and promote educational opportunities that focus on best management practices, watershed restoration, and watershed health (Gualala River Watershed Council, 2015).

Each of these goals included one or more work plan objectives, discussed below. Included are separate objectives formulated for the six-month “drought extension” funding received.

***Goal 1. Objective 1. Implement non-point source upslope sediment reduction projects in partnership with industrial landowners.*** Performance Measure: Hydrologically disconnect an additional 6% (80 miles) of timber and ranch roads saving over 200,000 cubic yards of sediment from entering the watercourses.

***Goal 1. Objective 2. Implement non-point source upslope sediment reduction projects in partnership with small to medium landowners.*** Performance Measure: Hydrologically disconnect an additional 3% (40 miles) of timber and ranch roads saving over 100,000 cubic yards of sediment from entering the watercourses.

As in other watersheds, the outcome of a §303(d) listing for the Gualala River (sedimentation) served to set priorities for the GRWC and other concerned parties. The watershed coordinator was instrumentally involved in two sediment reduction projects with the GRWC’s main partner, GRI. The projects were funded with a Proposition 50 grant and a grant from the Fisheries Restoration Grant Program of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). Set in two different locations, both efforts aimed to “hydrologically disconnect” over 10 miles of road on industrial forest lands, with an estimated reduction in sediment yields by more than 30,000 cubic yards.<sup>6</sup>

Further sediment reduction activities, when combined with the foregoing projects, resulted in hydrologic disconnection of approximately 10.2 miles of road during the term of the watershed

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<sup>5</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

<sup>6</sup> Treatments to “disconnect” roads from streams are designed to reduce road effects and risks to water quality and aquatic habitats. Methods used in this watershed to reduce hydrologic connectivity were primarily road reshaping and culvert redesign and replacement (Gualala River Watershed Council-B, n.d.).

coordinator grant. Though short of their 80-mile target, the GRWC was able to prioritize future project activities to address this in collaboration with The Conservation Fund’s Gualala Forest and Buckeye Forest Integrated Management Plans. With road upgrades, repairs, and decommissioning, the GRWC projected an additional 58.8 miles of roads would be assessed and upgraded.

Reducing sediment yield on other private lands in the watershed (forest, ranch, and other residential) presented a logistical challenge in that there are many small land ownerships, with 46% of holdings in 40–5000 acre parcels.<sup>7</sup> To address this objective, the GRWC created a Road Restoration Program wherein the secondary watershed coordinator recruited small- to medium-sized landowners for participation. By the end of the grant term, road managers from two “subdivided ranches” (Gualala and Seaview) were in preparatory stages of sediment reduction projects to “hydrologically disconnect” 40 miles of timber and ranch roads. Another 9.3 miles of hydrologically disconnected road were anticipated with the North Coast Integrated Regional Water Management Plan’s (NCIRWMP) approval of GRWC’s grant proposal to hydrologically disconnect 23.3 miles of road in the Lower Rockpile Creek Planning Watershed and Little Creek Planning Watershed.

Smaller landowners also benefited by watershed coordinators’ work with CAL FIRE’s California Forest Improvement Program (CFIP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. With facilitation by the GRWC watershed coordinator, both programs have had significant conservation impact on small- to medium-sized land holdings in the watershed. According to its report, the GRWC was working with six landowners to upgrade of over 10 miles of roads. At the time, another 32 miles was planned for completion by 2015.

***Goal 1. Objective 3. Provide landowners, partners and agencies with tools and resources for developing land use, restoration and conservation strategies that ensure consistency throughout the watershed. Use, when possible, existing efforts that support sound resource management.*** Performance Measure: Increase partnerships and develop plans to reduce NPS sediment delivery by 30%

One of the GRWC’s major accomplishments is in partnering with GRI, The Conservation Fund (TCF), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to implement projects to improve the morphology of stream channels. At present, a significant limitation on the health of salmonid populations stems from a lack of pools, which are the deep recesses that provide summer and winter refugia for many aquatic species. As one respondent described it, the watershed lacks the type of bedrock that would naturally provide this structure.<sup>8</sup> As such, pool depth and frequency—and therefore biotic health—are dependent on the natural recruitment into the stream of large woody debris from old-growth forests to create pools. However, following the near-complete harvest of old-growth, most streams within the watershed contain large wood “far below the levels associated with healthy streams” (Gualala River Watershed Council-C, n.d.).

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<sup>7</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

<sup>8</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

To address this situation, the GRWC created the *Large Wood in the Stream Program*, with the understanding that “[t]he placement of large wood into the stream channel is the most effective method to address the key limiting factors impacting salmonid survival in the Gualala River” (Gualala River Watershed Council-C, n.d.). The program was supported with funding from a North Coast IRWMP Implementation Grant, and implemented with critical resources from partner GRI. The GRWC reported that the project with GRI “has increased large wood in the watershed by 156%” (Gualala River Watershed Council, 2015). A GRWC display poster reporting on a previous, but similar project claims a placement of “856 logs or 110 logging truck loads in tributaries [north fork] within the Gualala River Watershed.” Monitoring data from this project revealed a rapid positive response in pool depth and frequency.

With its goal to increase partnerships and plans to reduce non-point source sediment delivery by 30%, the GRWC’s “integrated landowner outreach package” provided an important framework for outreach and education. The watershed coordinator played a central role in this process by partnering with CAL FIRE, the Sonoma County Forest Conservation Working Group (SCFCWG), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Outreach efforts providing important information about CAL FIRE’s California Forest Improvement Program (CFIP), as well as NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and reached over 1,100 small to medium landowners who took part in three workshops and 18 project tours. As a result, 24 landowners developed Forest Conservation Plans under the CFIP, aided by watershed coordinator A.

***Goal 2. Objective 1. Continue and expand GRWC monitoring program plan to assess and monitor water quality and quantity.*** Performance Measure: Increase Monitoring Program implementation by 15% over the next three years.

***Goal 2. Objective 2. Increase and formalize the Community Monitoring Program by developing specific sustainable monitoring projects for volunteers.*** Performance Measure: Recruit 20 new members to the Community Monitoring Program.

A centerpiece of GRWC’s work for over a decade has been its monitoring programs. In streams, there are five principal variables being measured to track biophysical trends in *channel morphology* and *salmonid environment* (“Monitoring Trends,” n.d.). For example, measuring the amount of large wood (which influences salmonid viability via pool depth and water temperature) allows one to capture the biological impacts of physical interventions (e.g., placement of large wood debris or reducing road sources of sediment).

The objectives of the watershed coordinator grant were to expand on a long legacy of partnered monitoring efforts (Cooperative Monitoring Program) and to increase direct public participation in monitoring (Community Monitoring Program). These two programs were intertwined with each other, in that the public was encouraged to participate in partnered efforts to acquire data on baseline conditions and trends in the watershed. Outreach was a notable factor in this coordinated effort:

*Workshops* – The GRWC conducted three Community Monitoring Program workshops, which brought in thirteen new volunteers.

*SWAMP restored* - The GRWC elicited interest from the North Coast Regional Water Quality Board (NCRWQB) to restore local monitoring activities as part of the Surface Water Ambient Monitoring Program (SWAMP). By 2012, four sites had been added. The project also led to an increase in the GRWC’s cadre of volunteers from the community.

*Salmonid surveys* – The watershed coordinators facilitated GRWC’s partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and NCRWQCB to help implement juvenile salmonid population surveys in a Gualala River sub-basin. New volunteers (13) were also added in this effort to conduct snorkel surveys.

*Access Agreements* - Nine new landowner access agreements were forged after the watershed coordinator B reached out to members of the Coast Ridge Community Forest. As a result, more extensive temperature monitoring in the watershed was established. The GRWC also partnered with The Conservation Fund (TCF) to provide baseline monitoring and long term project effectiveness monitoring of future project sites on local forest lands held by the Soper-Wheeler timber company.

*Media* – To facilitate greater public participation, watershed coordinator A developed and distributed the GRWC Volunteer Handbook and Volunteer Orientation Manual. A student intern contributed blog entries on various watershed-related topics.

***Goal 3. Objective 1. Develop and implement funding strategies for Gualala River Watershed Council.*** Performance Measure: Sustained staffing level for an additional 5-year horizon.

In its final report to the Department of Conservation, the GRWC stated that it had been awarded a total of \$1,837,757 from grant proposals submitted during the term of the DOC watershed coordinator grant. By far the largest proportion of funding—\$1.45 million—derives from the North Coast Resource Partnership (NCRP), a coalition of Tribes and counties (formerly the North Coast Integrated Regional Water Management Plan). The funds supported the GRWC’s extensive work on sediment reduction as well as its *Large Wood in the Stream Program*. Both efforts were also supported by the CDFW’s Fisheries Restoration Grant Program to the tune of \$307,317.

The “funding strategies” of this objective were clearly in service to the GRWC’s core mission, but also addressed the need to ensure stability and persistence of the organization itself. To that end, the final report notes that since the start of the watershed coordinator grant term, funded grants have obligated \$177,870 for staff. Although vital to operations, this figure likely falls far short of what was needed to maintain staffing (including watershed coordinators) over a five-year period.

Watershed coordinators also facilitated funding for the GRWC from other sources, for example, by developing a fee-for-service program that brought in \$52,468 for landowner-funded

monitoring projects, part of the Cooperative Monitoring Program. A smaller financial return was realized with an organized event that brought in \$8,319 in donations via four *Day on the River* events that engaged 270 individuals, including local businesses and landowners.

***Goal 4. Objective 1. Provide educational forums for partners and landowners to learn about conservation and restoration programs, techniques and cost sharing opportunities.***

Performance Measure: Provide educational opportunities to 200 landowners within the watershed

***Goal 4. Objective 2. Provide information to landowners, agencies and the community to stimulate critical thought and analysis on issues that impact the watershed.*** Performance Measure: Increase educational outreach to 500 landowners, agencies and the watershed community.

Both watershed coordinators were instrumental in a number of outreach and education activities targeting landowners and partners. In particular, the GRWC has a long-term restoration program that educates and assists landowners with planning, funding, and implementing Best Management Practices (BMPs) to upgrade roads that are a potential source of sedimentation (“Watershed Restoration,” n.d.). In support of these activities, watershed coordinators also connected with the GRWC’s many partners to disseminate existing data and conservation planning resources, such as GIS maps and layers, monitoring data, and road layers.<sup>9</sup>

Among GRWC’s outreach and education efforts to promulgate BMPs were numerous workshops and presentations facilitated in part by watershed coordinators. For example, the GRWC hosted six workshops for landowners that focused on Best Management Practices for watershed restoration and watershed health. A total of nearly 300 individuals attended workshops that included *Putting Your Forest Management Plan to Work* (41 attendees). The GRWC states that a significant number of these attendees are now participants in a GRWC watershed restoration program.

In addition to these workshops, watershed coordinators also supported 25 presentations to individual landowners about BMPs in the Gualala River watershed, including one to the Sonoma County Forest Conservation Working Group where 168 attended. The GRWC’s relationship with CAL FIRE continued, with 21 field tours conducted for smaller landowners seeking assistance in prioritizing and implementing conservation efforts under CFIP and EQIP.

Finally, watershed coordinators contributed to updating and expanding GRWC’s website. The website has evolved to become not just a source of general information about the organization and the watershed, but also a source of data and maps from their Cooperative Monitoring

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<sup>9</sup> Partners include Sonoma County Forest Conservation Working Group, Coast Ridge Community Forest, Brushy Loop Road Association, Soper-Wheeler, LLC., The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Mendocino County RCD, Sonoma RCD, Cal Fire, NRCS, NOAA-NMFS, CDFW, Redwood Coast Land Conservancy and Sonoma Land Trust.

Program. Since the launch of the new website in 2012, the growth in visitors has developed into a significant contribution to the GRWC's overall objective of increasing educational outreach.

### **Watershed Coordinator Grant Drought Extension**

***Drought Extension Objective 1: Develop the Gualala River Flow Bank Program.*** Performance Measure: Three workshops and/or field trips promoting water conservation projects with 25-50 participants each. Submit two additional proposals for funding of 10-100 new water conservation projects. Assist implementation of at least ten new 5,000-gallon storage and forbearance projects and one new 55,000-gallon system conserving 105,000 or more gallons of water during the summer months.

In response to a prolonged drought, the GRWC was awarded \$594,249 by the North Coast Resource Partnership (Proposition 84 drought funding via DWR) to create the *Gualala River Flow Bank Program* (Phase I). The program responds to a drought pattern of low flows and poor water quality that led to pumping restrictions and rate increases by the North Gualala Water Company ("Mandatory Conservation," 2013). The program couples rainwater catchment with diversion forbearance to store winter precipitation for use in summer low flow periods.

In essence, the Flow Bank Program creates a distributed network of small reservoirs, 55,000 and 5,000 gallon tanks fed by rainwater runoff from adjacent commercial and residential structures. At the time, the projected savings were 550,000 gallons per year, water that would normally be drawn from other diversions, springs, and wells. The success of this drought extension phase of the Flow Bank Program and increased demand for rainwater catchment systems has led to a second, Phase II grant received in 2016 from the same source.

Both watershed coordinators were instrumental in reaching out to potential participants in the Flow Bank Program. They developed and implemented three workshops to promote the program, which were attended by 79 community members and yielded 19 new landowner participants. The first workshop, *When In Drought... Adapting to an Uncertain Climate*, was well publicized using local public radio stations, for example, to broadcast an interview with one of the keynote speakers. In addition to promoting the Flow Bank Program, the goal of the interview and workshop was to increase public awareness of regional climate hydrology projections and preparations for long-term drought. One byproduct of the first workshop was increased collaboration with most of the conservation groups represented by presenters at the workshop.

**Other Drought Extension Objectives.** In addition to the Flow Bank Program, there were two other drought extension objectives that focused primarily on presenting or participating in various public and local club meetings (e.g., Rotary Club) on drought issues and climate change, and to promote water quality and quantity monitoring partnerships. During this time, watershed coordinators included water quantity monitoring in the North Coast Resource Partnership Project Performance and Monitoring Plan for the Flow Bank program. The resulting survey data will presumably allow the GRWC and program participants to detect any positive impacts of the catchment systems during summer low flows.



## Key Findings

The GRWC is a small, but long-lived organization that grew out of a local concern for declining salmonid populations. With the §303(d) listing of the Gualala River in 1993, the GRWC came into being, a process that one respondent states was supported and facilitated by the California Northcoast Regional Water Quality Control Board.<sup>10</sup> Since that time, the organization has engaged in numerous projects to “restore the natural balance of the watershed and preserve its environment from further degradation” (“Gualala River Portal, ” n.d.). One of the key findings in this study was the positive and catalyzing effect of a single watershed coordinator grant on the extent of the organization’s operations, particularly in public engagement. Likewise, there were attributes and strengths of the GRWC that heightened the effectiveness of the two watershed coordinators. The synergistic relationship between organizations and grant program frames the discussion below.

### Watershed Coordination Grant Catalyzes

The watershed coordinator was seen by most as an “essential position” in the functioning of the GRWC. Also called a “gift to the community” by one respondent, the watershed coordinator grant funds helped “run the office,” develop a website, free up staff to write grants, and do more essential planning.<sup>11</sup>

There were also many less quantifiable benefits. Respondents referred to the many grants written throughout the coordinator’s tenure, as well as the all-important task of “having a face,” i.e., a presence in the community. In addition to the new outreach to smaller landowners by watershed coordinator A, watershed coordinator B engaged the public in the southern part of the county, picking up where the Sonoma RCD had left off.

One respondent described one of the lasting impacts of the watershed coordinator program as “getting people started in sustained management of their properties,” in this case via CFIP, the California Forest Improvement Program.<sup>12</sup> The watershed coordinator grant allowed the GRWC to expand its scope of operations beyond the stream channel and stream restoration to focus more holistically on land management, including facilitating the creation of forest management plans for private landowners.<sup>13</sup> Such a move “upslope” expands the original scope of stream restoration, bringing in other issues such as climate change, drought, and wildfire.

Finally, with the departure of watershed coordinators the GRWC has lost much of its capacity for public outreach.<sup>14</sup> This evolution toward a less public-facing organization is lamented, with one respondent proclaiming that she misses the meetings and monthly newsletters, the latter now replaced with a GRWC blog last updated in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

<sup>11</sup> Respondent C, pers. comm.

<sup>12</sup> Respondent E, pers. comm.

<sup>13</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

<sup>14</sup> Respondent A, pers. comm.

<sup>15</sup> Respondent E, pers. comm.

## **Science and Technology Foundations**

The effectiveness of watershed coordinators in their brief tenure also stemmed from the GRWC's years of experience in conducting its business using scientific assessments and technology. For instance, the Gualala River was the second watershed in California to have a "technical support document" in response to a listing, authored by the California Regional Water Quality Control Board (2001). According to that document, "various activities to control anthropogenic sediment loading...have occurred or are underway," a reference to early mitigation activities in the watershed by the GRWC and its long-term partner, GRI.

During the years 1999 to 2002, the GRWC's scientific foundation was further bolstered by development of the Gualala River Watershed Assessment Report (2003) under the multi-agency North Coast Watershed Assessment Program. Still in use today as a guide for implementation and monitoring projects, the assessment assembled for the first time information on the geography, geology, water resources, and natural resources of the watershed (Klamt et al., 2002). The GRWC was utilizing a part-time watershed coordinator at the time—1999 to 2005—well before receipt of the 2011-2014 watershed coordinator grant.<sup>16</sup> As such, by the time of the 2011-2014 grant examined in this study, the organization had already acquired lengthy experience with the concept and practice of watershed coordination.

Lastly, GRWC's science and technology foundation includes over 18 years of accumulated monitoring data. The GRWC Monitoring Program was "designed to examine and understand watershed conditions and restoration effectiveness through collaboration with private landowners, community groups, and public agencies (Gualala River Watershed Council-D, n.d.). At present, there are 35 monitoring reaches installed along with 100 water quality sites within the watershed. Although there is a push to monitor more extensively in the watershed, the existing monitoring framework has allowed the GRWC to make strong inferences about long term natural changes versus project impacts on various measures of watershed health, e.g., channel and bank stability.

### **A Key Partnership**

The small size of the GRWC belies the breadth and depth of the scientific and social knowledge and experience that have shaped the programs and projects facilitated by the watershed coordinators under this grant. This, along the organization's many successful projects, can be explained in part by its long-standing relationship with GRI, Gualala Redwoods, Inc., one of the largest landowners in the watershed. Indeed, one of GRI's former executives sits on the board, and has worked closely with the GRWC executive director for many years.

In the process of conducting interviews, it became clear that the GRWC and GRI have many complementary assets that have been conducive to an effective partnership. In one respondent's words, the two organizations "play to each other's strengths." For instance, GRI serves as a data repository for the GRWC and are paid to conduct the non-profit's GIS work. The company also has management expertise to "move wood," involving a set of skills useful in restoring stream

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<sup>16</sup> Funding for this coordinator position derived primarily from another long-standing partner, CAL FIRE, and was described as "cobbled together from several grants."

morphology via additions of large logs to create pools as habitat. In 2009, GRI “made payments” to the GRWC, advances on grant dollars owed after the state’s bond funding freeze.

While the partnership has been effective, it has not been without some cost. A local environmental group, Friends of Gualala River, has been a vocal critic of the fact that “industry professionals” sit on the GRWC board. One of these individuals, a former GRI executive, states, “Most of what we do, we don’t have to do.” This suggests a more charitable interpretation of the contributions made by GRI, one that has garnered “more respect” from government agencies. When the GRWC received the NCRWQCB Stewardship Award, GRI and its “industry professional” was acknowledged for “their collaborative efforts and support of the Watershed Council’s work to restore the natural balance of the Gualala River Watershed (“Gualala River Hot Topics,” n.d.).

## **Lessons Learned**

It is clear from interviews and other data that the watershed coordinators at GRWC were highly effective and successful in supporting the organization’s goals for water quality and quantity, monitoring, and public outreach to facilitate stewardship. As for the goal of building internal capacity of the organization, success was noticeable, but short-lived.<sup>17</sup> For example, the cumulative total of new grant funds received during the watershed coordinator grant term (2011-2014) was \$1,837,757, an annual average of \$612,586. This figure is markedly higher than total dollars received from grants from 2009 to 2013.<sup>18</sup> This supports the assertion by interviewees that watershed coordinators afforded the GRWC significant leverage in acquiring new grant funding.

Yet despite the influx of new project dollars, the GRWC found itself unable to support a coordinator position beyond the grant term. One likely explanation is related to the relatively small size of GRWC in terms of both personnel and capital reserves for long-term investments. The departure of two watershed coordinators effectively halved the size of the organization’s staff, a large proportional change that thwarted continuity in education, outreach, and facilitation. Another factor may have been the structure of grants received. The GRWC reported that of the funded proposals submitted to three agencies, only \$177,870 (less than 10%) was obligated for staff during the grant term.

There is another lesson to be inferred from what to some may be a paradox, i.e., a non-profit organization enjoys highly successful project and program outcomes, but is unable to grow into a secure position financially that would afford continuity of watershed coordination activities. In short, capacity building of the type envisioned by the DOC’s watershed coordinator grant program was a “one size fits all” approach to “sustain the watershed coordinator position beyond the life of the grant.” Clearly, this does not work for the smallest of organizations regardless of

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<sup>17</sup> The California Department of Conservation’s initial 2004 call for proposals specified an interest in “funding proposals with the potential to result in long-term sustainable benefits” and “to sustain the watershed coordinator position beyond the life of the grant...” (California Department of Conservation, n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> According to the GRWC’s Form 990s, “gifts, grants and contributions” were reported as 2009: \$47,876; 2010: \$80,343; 2011: \$31,766; 2012: \$161,802; 2013: \$230,666 (Gualala River Watershed Inc. GuideStar Profile, n.d.)

their effectiveness in social and ecological domains. It also brings into relief the challenge for even a successful coordinator continuing to bring in funding sufficient to support the position. Whether this was because the type of grants were mostly project grants and could not be used for coordination, or there are limited funds available for this important coordinator work is unclear. But it does underscore the importance of coordinator grants and the flexibility they offer, and what they can be used for.

## Methods

One researcher traveled to Gualala, CA to conduct four in-person interviews. Several telephone conversations with some of these interviewees took place both before and after face-to-face encounters. A fifth in-depth interview was conducted by telephone, as the interviewee had moved away from the Gualala area. Interview participants represented (or had previously represented) various entities, including the Gualala River Watershed Council, Gualala Redwoods, Inc., and CAL FIRE. In addition, the researcher reviewed all available documents related to the grants, as well as numerous online resources documenting grant activities and their public perceptions.

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