

Report to the Board of Supervisors of Mendocino County

To: Hon. Board of Supervisors for Mendocino County
From: Stephanie Garrabrant-Sierra, Executive Director, Mendocino County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD)
Date: July 7, 2026

Subject: Update on The Activities of The Mendocino County Resource Conservation District

The Mendocino County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) is a Special District of the State of California, first formed in 1945 as a soil conservation district. It is governed by a board of volunteer directors who have been appointed by the Board of Supervisors and who have decades of experience working with conservation experience in Mendocino County.

The MCRCD has grown and changed over the years and today we have a permanent staff of 16.5 FTEs in two offices, our own building on 115 E. Smith St. in the heart of Ukiah's developing business district. We also have an office in Willits that is devoted to the Willits Bypass Mitigation project. Our budget has gradually grown from just a few thousand dollars each year to approximately \$10.5 Million for fiscal year 2026-27.

The MCRCD is a non-regulatory government agency dedicated to serving public and private landowners and land stewards throughout the County. There are over 3000 special districts serving in this capacity throughout the country, present in almost every county in the United States. California has 98 RCDs and is one of only 3 states which does not support its conservation districts with dedicated funding. Instead, RCDs in California must rely on grants, County budget appropriations, fee for service contracts, or tax revenues, for those RCDs who receive tax increments or property tax assessments. The MCRCD receives no tax increment or property tax income and must rely solely on grants, contracts, and donations.

The MCRCD efficiently responds to climate change needs within the County to address post-fire reforestation/recovery, fire preparedness, drought resiliency, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and water quality protection. MCRCD holds a distinct role as a trusted non-regulatory agency that partners with the County, landowners, resource managers, Native Tribes, and the public to provide vital services and information to assist with natural resource issues and challenges. The County of Mendocino has successfully partnered with the MCRCD on a wide variety of projects over the last twenty years, from forest health projects to water monitoring to community cleanups to great success and we are looking forward to continuing this relationship to further our shared goals.

The MCRCD continuously works to secure grant funding for our Forest Health, Sustainable Agriculture, and Water Resource programs. The attached slide show demonstrates some of the extensive competitive grant funds we have secured in the past few years that will benefit the

County's economy and environment. Most of this funding will go to on-the-ground implementation of projects that support local contractors and address environmental challenges.

Our success in securing these dollars has been made possible partially through the support of Mendocino County throughout the years, as grant funds do not pay for time spent searching for grants, talking to landowners regarding their needs, or writing grants, often a very time-consuming process. Your small investment over the years has leveraged many millions of dollars in grant funding, an extraordinary return on investment. You may have noticed that this year has been the first year in many years that we have not requested funds from the County. We understand that the County is going through tight budgetary times and we wanted to do our part to assist and try to make our own way this year. We do hope that you can assist in other ways, however, such as helping us secure space for our equipment and the ability to work together on contracts.

Working on contracts together is a win-win for the County and for the MCRCD. As a governmental agency, state law allows the County and the MCRCD to enter into Inter-agency agreements to perform work without a competitive process. State agencies have taken advantage of this by putting projects on the ground more efficiently by contracting directly with the MCRCD to save time and money. We then use a competitive process to hire contractors to do the work, thus saving other government agencies the time and effort and bureaucracy of putting projects out to bid for themselves. Because we are a Special District, we may use alternative contracting methods which prioritize ecologically friendly contractors, including local contractors that use local workers. We also add points for Tribal entities and have been increasing our work with local Tribes both as partners and as subcontractors.

In reviewing the history of our agencies, it surprised us to note that the MCRCD and the County used to work together extensively on road projects and forest health projects. We assume that changes in personnel in both agencies have caused us to lose those contacts and we would like to change that. We are currently working with the City of Ukiah on their West Hills Trail project, performing fire hardening and other technical work and we would love to bring the County back into our forest health, healthy soils, and water sustainability work. We can work together to bring increased grant funds into our county to benefit rural areas. As we write grants to State agencies to benefit the County, we are often asked how the County is participating because they do want to see that we work together to benefit county residents. We propose that the County begin meeting with the MCRCD to explore ways to work together and to put us under a department so we know to whom we can go to with proposed ideas and projects.

The MCRCD has four divisions, Soils and Agriculture, Water Resources, Forest Health, and Land Stewardship, although all divisions work together on many shared projects.

Sustainable Agriculture Program

Conserving Mendocino County's Farmland

MCRCD's Sustainable Agriculture Program partners with farmers, ranchers, Tribes, schools, and supporting organizations to build healthy soil, implement regenerative stewardship practices, improve wildlife and pollinator habitat, protect clean water, and build resilience to drought, wildfire, and climate change on working lands across Mendocino County.

Why It Matters

Healthy working lands are more prepared for drought, reduce erosion and flood impacts in our watersheds, increase carbon sequestration, support wildlife habitat connectivity, and keep Mendocino County's agricultural economy productive and diverse.

2025/2026 Program Snapshot

- 8 active projects across Mendocino County
- Current projects are mainly programmatic grants that support over 50 farmers, ranchers, tribes, and schools with individual projects of their own
- Approximately \$1 million on average annually secured for implementation of sustainable practices – compost, reduced tillage, habitat plantings, cover crops, prescribed grazing, etc.
- Technical assistance provided through conservation planning, soil sampling and analysis, grant administration and application assistance, educational and demonstration workshops, and technical support for implementing sustainable practices
- Collaborative work with neighboring RCD agriculture programs to strengthen outreach network, technical expertise, and resources available to Mendocino County land stewards
- Hundreds of community members reached annually

What We Do

- **Build Soil Health:** address the soil's physical, chemical, and biological properties as a living ecosystem so it can better support plant growth, cycle nutrients, retain water, and resist erosion
- **Support Native Habitat:** break up biodiversity deserts, invite beneficial wildlife into the farm, restore riparian zones, demonstrate the importance of native plants and pollinators
- **Provide Peer-to-Peer Learning Opportunities:** bring together farmers, funders, researchers, and conservation professionals to share practical experiences,

demonstrate successful practices, and build local knowledge through workshops and collaborative networks.

- **Farm-to-School Education:** connect schools with the local food web and agriculture education
- **Community Engagement & Regional Planning:** outreach and regional planning to understand and serve the needs of the community and our ever-evolving landscapes
- **Advance Climate Goals:** approach all aspects of our work through a climate-driven lens

Contact

Learn more about MCRCD's Sustainable Agriculture Program:

Seth Myrick, Sustainable Agriculture Program Manager

115 E. Smith Street, Ukiah, CA | 707-462-3664 ext. 110 | seth.myrick@mcrcd.org |

www.mcrcd.org

Water Resources Program

Protecting Mendocino County's Water

MCRCD's Water Resources Program partners with landowners, Tribes, agencies, and local communities to protect clean water, restore streams and habitat, and build resilience to drought, wildfire, and climate change across Mendocino County.

Why It Matters

Healthy water systems support wildlife, strengthen communities, reduce wildfire risk, and help Mendocino County adapt to a changing climate.

Current Projects

- 15 active projects across Mendocino County
- Approximately \$14.1 million secured for local water solutions
- Projects in the Navarro River, Russian River, and Eel River watersheds
- More than 24 miles of road improvements to reduce sediment
- 28 water storage tanks installed or planned, totaling 535,000 gallons
- 26 groundwater monitoring wells
- Russian River Clean up removed 16,000 of pounds of trash in 2025
- Hundreds of community members reached, including private, state, county, and Tribal lands

What We Do

- **Improve Water Quality:** Reducing sediment and stormwater impacts from rural roads
- **Expand Water Conservation & Storage:** Supporting rainwater catchment, irrigation upgrades, and rural water storage
- **Increase Streamflows & Groundwater Recharge:** Advancing groundwater recharge and summer flow enhancement projects
- **Restore Habitat & Fisheries:** Improving stream and fish habitat through restoration and fish passage projects.
- **Support Communities & Watershed Planning:** Technical assistance, outreach, monitoring, and regional planning with local and state partners.
- **Advance Climate Resilience:** Drought and flood preparedness and improved access to reliable water resources.

Contact

Learn more about MCRCD's water resources work: mcrcd.org 115 E. Smith Street, Ukiah, CA | 707-462-3664

Forestry Program

Protecting Mendocino County's Forests

MCRCD's Forest Health and Resilience Program partners with landowners, Tribes, agencies, and local communities to improve the health of Mendocino County's forests and woodlands. Through collaborative planning and on-the-ground projects, the program reduces the risk of severe wildfire, strengthens resilience to drought, disease, insect infestations, and climate change, protects water quality, and restores streams and wildlife habitat.

Why It Matters

Healthy forests provide habitat for fish and wildlife, protect water quality, reduce the risk of severe wildfire, support local communities, and help Mendocino County adapt to drought and a changing climate.

Current Projects

- 34 active forest health and wildfire resilience projects across Mendocino County
- Approximately \$18.5 million secured for local forestry projects
- Major projects underway in South Leggett, Montgomery Woods State Natural Reserve, Leonard Lake Reserve, the City of Ukiah's western hills, and Anderson Valley near Philo
- Technical assistance and cost-share funding provided to hundreds of landowners and community members on private, Tribal, state, and federal lands throughout the county

What We Do

- **Improve Forest Health:** Thin overcrowded forest stands and understory vegetation to reduce competition for water and nutrients, limit the spread of insects and disease, reduce the risk of severe wildfire, and protect homes and other community assets.
- **Improve Watershed Health:** Restore forest and watershed conditions that protect water quality, improve water availability, reduce erosion, and support healthy streams and aquatic habitat.
- **Increase the Pace and Scale of Restoration:** Develop partnerships, secure funding, and coordinate projects that address forest and watershed health across property boundaries and larger landscapes.
- **Restore Habitat:** Improve forest, oak woodland, stream, and riparian habitat for fish, wildlife, and native plant communities.

- **Support Communities and Reduce Wildfire Risk:** Provide technical assistance, cost-share support, public outreach, project monitoring, and regional planning in partnership with landowners, Tribes, agencies, and community organizations.
- **Advance Climate Resilience:** Help forests, watersheds, and communities prepare for drought, wildfire, flooding, and other effects of a changing climate.

Contact

Learn more about MCRCD's forestry work: mcrcd.org

115 E. Smith Street, Ukiah, CA | 707-462-3664

Land Stewardship Program

Stewardship of nearly 2000 acres in the Willits Little Lake Valley to Mitigate Adverse Effects of the Willits Bypass

The Willits Bypass Mitigation Project is the primary focus of the Land Stewardship program at the MCRCD. With a project staff of three full-time employees and one part-time employee operating out of a field office in Willits, as well as the support of the greater MCRCD organization with participation from all programs Water, Soil, Forest, and Operations, the project has been part of the MCRCD portfolio since 2014. Working in partnership with CalTrans and funded by a non-wasting endowment held and managed by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), MCRCD is the acting site manager for the mitigation lands project under a cooperative agreement with the department of transportation. Guided by two Mitigation and Monitoring Plans or MMPs, one federal plan and one state plan, the MCRCD has nearly completed the 10-year interim phase of the project and is poised to move into the Long-Term management phase. Upon reaching success criteria with regulatory agencies for their compensatory mitigation efforts, and the recording of a conservation easement with the California Department of Wildlife, and Army Corp of Engineers, CalTrans will begin transferring all parcels associated with the mitigation lands in fee and title to the MCRCD to hold and manage in perpetuity. The construction of the bypass by CalTrans around the town of Willits had been in planning for decades prior to breaking ground in 2014. The roadway construction included:

- 5.9 miles bypass roadway
- 2 interchanges
- 6 bridges spanning local roadways/RR & creek crossings
- Viaduct spanning 100-year flood plain of several creeks

As a result of the construction of the roadway, certain natural resources in the Little Lake Valley were both permanently and temporarily impacted to an extent that compensatory mitigation efforts were required to offset these losses. These impacts were:

- Wetland impacts
 - 48.5 acres (permanent impacts)
 - 25 acres (temporary impacts)
- Other Waters of the US
 - 2.6 acres (permanent impacts)
 - 3.5 acres (temporary impacts)
- North Coast semaphore grass 0.3 acre impacted
- Baker's meadowfoam habitat: 121 acres impacted
- Riparian corridors
 - 16.1 acres impacted
- Oak woodland (tree canopy) habitat: 12.5 acres impacted
- Oak woodland (grassland) habitat: 53 acres impacted

Bypass Mitigation Framework was created to meet the required compensatory mitigation credits assigned to the project by the Army Corp of Engineers, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board based on the impacts listed above. The overall vision of the project's compensatory mitigation strategy was to establish, rehabilitate, reestablish, and preserve a mosaic of high functioning habitats in perpetuity, thus increasing the ecological value and improving water quality in the Eel River Basin. The components of these efforts included creating, establishing or preserving wetlands, oak woodlands, wet meadows, stream channels, riparian corridors, and rare plants. These efforts by CalTrans with MCRCDs assistance included:

- Wetlands establishment (60.5 acres)
- Wetlands enhancement (442.6 acres)
- Riparian preservation (201 acres) and Establishment (53.5 acres)
- Oak woodland preservation (230.3 acres) and establishment (6.5 acres)
- 265,384 herbaceous plants 14 Wetland Establishment sites
- 509,720 herbaceous and 6,248 tree and shrub plantings installed across most of the Wetland Rehabilitation sites (approx. 25 acres)
- 400 acres of Riparian Establishment was also planted (76,836 herbaceous and 38,019 trees and shrubs)
- Overall, just under 1 million plants went into the ground by the fall of 2016

The MCRCD has assumed the role of both interim and long-term manager of the mitigation lands and since 2014 has been the acting land manager in partnership with Caltrans assisting in the effort to reach success criteria. Overseeing the day-to-day operations on mitigation lands by the MCRCD include:

- Maintaining and improving the structure and function of seasonal wetlands, oak woodlands, and riparian habitats
- Reducing targeted invasive plant species
- Providing ecologically and economically sustainable management of Conservation Grazing Lands (1,078 acres).
- Supporting a cooperative and effective partnership with the grazing tenants
- Maintaining and expanding populations of Baker's meadowfoam and North Coast semaphore grass
- Maintaining and expanding populations of Baker's meadowfoam and North Coast semaphore grass
- Infrastructure maintenance
- Wildlife monitoring
- Stream channel assessment and maintenance
- Community outreach and education
- Protecting cultural resources

Although the work on the Willits Bypass Mitigation Lands has been the main focus of the Land Stewardship Program, the experience and professional services offered by project staff are resources for the community and the county at large. Providing expertise in land management of working landscapes, invasive species management, infrastructure maintenance and innovation including adaptation for wildlife, habitat maintenance, and educational resources and curriculum for schools and the general public are all part of the program.

Mitigation lands are a classroom for MCRCD's education and outreach program offering monthly educational tours and field trips for local school children and the public at large. Programing is administered out of MCRCD's interpretive room at the Mendocino County Museum where MCRCD leases space, allowing the public to come in and see exhibits of wildlife and plants. Project staff are also working with Cal Poly Humbolt and U.C. Berkley undergraduate and graduate students, the local chapter of the Peregrine Audubon Society, and the California Native Plant Society.

The Land Stewardship Program runs a bi-weekly blog, a YouTube channel that features footage from our wildlife cameras, and as noted above, holds monthly walking tours for the public.

Contact Chris Bartow at Chris.bartow@mcrcd.org for more information.

MCRCD Current Project Locations



Legend

- Supervisor Districts
- Rivers
- Communities
- Highways
- Project Type**
- Forestry
- Soils
- Water