



News Release

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ESSELEN TRIBE OF MONTEREY COUNTY RECEIVES \$4.5 MILLION GRANT FROM CALIFORNIA NATURAL RESOURCES AGENCY

MONTEREY, Calif.—As a result of a partnership between the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County (ETMC) and Western Rivers Conservancy, the tribe received a \$4,520,000 grant last week from the California Natural Resources Agency that will fund the tribe’s acquisition of sacred indigenous lands in Big Sur, California.

The partners are currently working to purchase a 1,200-acre property along a mile of the Little Sur River and transfer title of the lands to the Esselen Tribe - a Native American Tribe that was once thought to be extinct, now with an ancestral based membership close to 200 and growing.

The project will mark the first acquisition of ancestral homelands by the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, and it will realize the Western Rivers Conservancy’s and the tribe’s shared vision to protect and preserve a crucial property along the Little Sur River.

The project, called the Esselen Tribal Lands Conservation Project, is one of 21 projects picked to receive Proposition 68 funding throughout the State of California. Prop 68 was created to help protect and enhance natural, cultural, historic, park and community resources.

“These awards are a unique opportunity to help protect and celebrate important cultural resources while also building climate resiliency and expanding access to recreation,” California Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot said. “We’re excited to support projects that enable communities to showcase traditional practices and promote sustainability.”

“It is with great honor that our tribe has been called by our Ancestors to become stewards of these sacred indigenous lands once again,” stated Tom Little Bear Nason, Tribal Chairman of the ETMC. “These lands are home to many ancient villages of our people, and directly across the Little Sur River sits Pico Blanco or ‘Pitchi’, which is the most sacred spot on the coast for the Esselen People and the center of our origin story.”

“The Little Sur River is a freshwater lifeline at the heart of the Big Sur Coast,” said Sue Doroff, President of Western Rivers Conservancy. “We are honored to be working with the Esselen Tribe to deliver conservation results that benefit the stream, the Esselen People, the local community and the increasingly fragile fish and wildlife of this unquestionably magical place.”

The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County is eager to reclaim this portion of its ancestral homelands so that its members can revisit and protect their ancient villages, gather native plants, and conduct prayers, burials and other ceremonies.

The tribe is equally motivated to invite and gather with other indigenous tribes on the land, and to share the cultural and natural resources of the land with school children and others on a limited, docent-led basis, so that visitors from the local community, the state of California and beyond can appreciate both the natural beauty and the cultural significance of this part of the Big Sur coast.

The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County has been working closely with Western Rivers Conservancy to conserve the property, which is located in the northern area of the Big Sur Coast along the Little Sur River and links the protected lands on the coast to the Santa Lucia mountain range. This connectivity is critical for wildlife, including the endangered California condor which needs healthy, intact habitat across large expanses of the Big Sur coast.

The project will conserve some of the southernmost naturally occurring old-growth redwoods in the world, as well as important upland grasslands, oak woodlands and chaparral and madrone forest. Threatened California red-legged frog are found on the property, and the Little Sur River is home to south-central coast steelhead, which are imperiled throughout their range.

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About the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County

The Mission of the ETMC is to preserve and to protect our cultural heritage and ancestral sacred sites. The efforts of the organization are not solely dedicated to the Esselen Tribe, but encompass protection and preservation of the Esselen, Rumsen, Chalone, Sureño, Chunchunes and Guatcharrone people, which includes but is not limited to the villages of Achasta, Chalon, Echilat, Ensen, Excelen, Esslenajan, Ixchenta, Jojopan, Kuchun, Pachepas, Sargenta-Ruc, Soccoronda, & Tucutnut, all which are located within sacred pre-historic and historic tribal lands of Monterey County, California.

The Esselen Tribe of Monterey County, a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Organization, was founded with the goal of continuing cultural traditions and preserving the cultural heritage of the historic tribes that are located within Monterey County, along with protecting and preserving the recognized and unrecognized sacred lands and archeological sites.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By working with federal, state and local agencies, Native American tribes and other organizations and by

applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Klamath, Eel, Goose Creek/Smith, Rio Grande, Yampa, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

History of the Esselen Tribe of Monterey County

The Esselen Tribe is a small group of Indigenous Hokan speaking People who have inhabited the Santa Lucia Mountains, a range that lies along the Big Sur coast from Carmel Mission south to Pacific Valley for over 6,000 years. The Esselen are the smallest tribe and least known in the United States.

In 1602 the Spanish explorer, Sebastian Vizcaino, first visited Monterey. One hundred fifty years later Junipero Serra, a Spanish missionary, traveled up the Pacific coast from Mexico to find the California Missions that still exists today, attempting to convert the Esselen to Catholicism. The Indigenous inhabitants of the Monterey and surrounding areas were gathered up and taken in to three missions: Mission Carmel, San Antonio Mission and the Soledad Mission, strategically placed in a geographical triangle around the Santa Lucia Mountains, the ancient homeland of the Esselen. They hoped to take the land for the Spanish king, Carols III, and this had severe consequences for the Esselen and other tribes that called these mountains their home. There were other tribes that were also affected by the missionary's efforts - the Esselen, Rumsen (Southern Costanoan aka Southern Ohlone), and the Salinan People were all in these three missions.

Thankfully, due to the steep rugged terrain of the Santa Lucia Mountains, a small population of native Esselen sought refuge deep in the mountains and never were captured. Many Esselen also escaped the missions and ran back into the mountains never to be seen again. And some of the captured Esselen managed to survive this incredible tragedy and lived to see the Spanish Missions fall into disuse after the Mexican Revolution. There are ethnographic studies and archaeology studies that have explored this history, and evidence of habitation sites so remote in the Santa Lucia's that they are hard to locate today. Since that time the indigenous peoples of Big Sur have been a landless group.

For more information, please visit www.esselentribe.org