



May 7, 2021

To: Caltrans Director Toks Omishakin
P.O. Box 942873 Sacramento, CA 94273-0001

Caltrans District 1 Director Matt Brady
P.O. Box 3700 Eureka, CA 95502-3700

Secretary for Natural Resources Wade Crowfoot
California Natural Resources Agency
1416 Ninth Street, Suite 1311, Sacramento, CA 95814

Armando Quintero, Director
California Department of Parks and Recreation
1416 Ninth Street, Sacramento, CA 95814

District Superintendent Victor Bjelajac
California State Parks/North Coast Redwoods
P.O. Box 2006 Eureka, CA 95502-2006

From: InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council
P.O. Box 1523 Ukiah, CA 95482

Environmental Protection Information Center
145 G Street, Suite A, Arcata CA 95521

Re: Tribal Cultural Significance of Richardson Grove State Park

The InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council (Sinkyone Council) joins the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) in calling for Caltrans to reconsider the proposed Richardson Grove Improvement Project. The controversial project has been delayed for over a decade due to public concerns that it would harm old-growth redwood trees in Richardson Grove State Park that is bisected by a one-mile segment of US 101, portions of which Caltrans has proposed to widen. In addition to the very concerning environmental and public trust consequences of this project, Caltrans has failed to adequately consider the impacts of this project to Indigenous Peoples and culture.

The original inhabitants of what is today called Richardson Grove State Park are the Sinkyone People. The Sinkyone People lived in a harmonious manner in the area of Richardson Grove



State Park for countless generations by carefully tending their lands and waters to ensure biological diversity and abundance. This included seasonal burning of understory plants to promote ecosystem health and productivity. In the mid-1800s, the Sinkyone and other Indigenous Peoples of the region were hunted down, massacred and displaced by invading whites. Their lands were forcibly taken and survivors subjected to numerous atrocities. Like many other Tribal Peoples, the surviving Sinkyone were denied a land base. Ultimately, many became members of neighboring Tribes confined to reservations throughout the region. In spite of every effort being made by invading whites to rob the surviving Sinkyone of their culture, Richardson Grove continues to hold great cultural significance for Sinkyone descendants and the Tribes of this region as an important place of prayer, ceremony and cultural lifeways.

Gááhs-tcho (redwood tree) is a special relative whom Indigenous Peoples were taught to never harm. Tribal leaders throughout the redwood region often have spoken of the duty to honor and protect the Gááhs-tcho, and warned about the consequences of harming them. “As Indigenous Peoples, our responsibility is to respect and care for places like the Grove because of their inherent sacredness and importance within the larger Gááhs-tcho temperate rainforest of this region and beyond. The Grove is an irreplaceable part of the cultural landscape and identity of the Sinkyone People,” asserts Mary Norris who is Chairwoman at the Cahto Tribe of Laytonville Rancheria, the Tribal community situated closest to the Grove today. Sinkyone descendants and Tribes of this region continue to regard the Gááhs-tcho of Richardson Grove as sacred and as a Traditional Cultural Property. It is one of only a few remaining ancient redwood groves, a critical part of the surviving 2% old-growth redwood still standing. Tribal members maintain cultural relationship with the Grove as an important place for the continuation of traditional ways of life, as Sinkyone ancestors for millennia did. For these and other reasons, it is vitally important that the Grove be accorded sufficient protections that in turn will ensure Indigenous Sinkyone cultural heritage and lifeways are respected and protected.

Sinkyone and other Tribal peoples of this region are strongly opposed to the proposed highway widening project. The Sinkyone, along with many other Indigenous Peoples, relate to Gááhs-tcho as communities of sacred beings who provide protection, abundance and balance for the world. Crista Ray is a longtime Sinkyone Council member and direct descendant of Sinkyone ancestors from the region in which the Grove is situated. A member of the Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians, she is also of Cahto, Concow, Nomlaki, Patwin, Pomo, Wailaki, Wintun, and Yuki ancestry. According to Ray, “The Grove is in traditional Sinkyone territory and remains important to the cultural heritage of Sinkyone People. It also holds significance for neighboring Tribes. The proposed project poses a serious threat to the Grove. If allowed, it would cause harm by disrupting spiritual and cultural connections the Sinkyone have maintained with the Grove since time immemorial. The wellbeing of the Grove’s Gááhs-tcho community would be permanently damaged by the widening. If the Grove is harmed, then so are the Sinkyone People. This would violate our Indigenous rights, religious freedoms, and traditional role of providing protection and care for the Grove.”



The Sinkyone Council is a consortium of ten federally recognized Tribes that retain important cultural connections to the Sinkyone traditional territory, including Richardson Grove. The Council's adamant opposition to the proposed road widening reflects the Tribal organization's founding purpose to protect culturally important lands, waters, species, and ecosystems within Sinkyone territory and beyond. The Council's commitment to defending nature and supporting revitalization of Tribal traditional lifeways and relationships with cultural landscapes and seascapes is guided by the long continuum of Tribal presence in places like the Grove. The Council has a long track record of demanding state and federal agency compliance with cultural protection laws. Agencies have legal requirements to protect Tribal cultural heritage and values, and to prevent harmful impacts to Tribes' cultural properties and ways of life, including cultural places. This principle is underscored by Sinkyone Council Chairwoman Priscilla Hunter, who asserts "Caltrans has a duty to honor and uphold protection for cultural places such as the Grove. The Sinkyone Council, the Tribes and the public expect Caltrans and other agencies to fully adhere to the laws and policies that require protection for places like the Grove. We hold these agencies accountable because they have a clear duty to protect the Grove's cultural heritage."

As currently proposed, the Richardson Grove Improvement Project fails to adequately account for the park's cultural importance to Sinkyone descendants and the Tribes of this region. For these reasons, we call upon Caltrans to halt this destructive and unnecessary project.

Sincerely,

Tribal Representatives of the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council:

- Mary Norris*, Cahto Tribe of Laytonville Rancheria
- Priscilla Hunter*, Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- Suzanne Romero*, Hopland Band of Pomo Indians
- Mariah Rosales*, Potter Valley Tribe
- Debra Ramirez*, Redwood Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- Jaime Boggs*, Robinson Rancheria of Pomo Indians
- Mona Oandasan*, Round Valley Indian Tribes
- Crista Ray*, Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- Buffie Schmidt*, Sherwood Valley Rancheria of Pomo Indians

Hawk Rosales
Executive Director
InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council

Thomas Wheeler
Executive Director
Environmental Protection Information Center