

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Conservation group helps save Skunk Train



By Peter Fimrite

June 19, 2013

The world-famous Skunk Train, stopped in its tracks earlier this year by a tunnel collapse, was given a new lease on life Tuesday after San Francisco's Save the Redwoods League stepped up with fix-it money.

The nonprofit conservation group purchased a \$300,000 option to establish an easement protecting redwoods and ensuring public access along the 40-mile Skunk Train route in Mendocino County - exactly the amount the cash-strapped Mendocino Railway needed to fix the tunnel.

Robert Pinoli, the owner and CEO of the railroad, said debris removal and repairs will begin immediately. He expects the train to be up and running from Willits to Northspur by the beginning of next month, with full service restored by mid-July.

"The Skunk Train is vital to the local economy, and without it, the whole area suffers," Pinoli said. "I'm so grateful to Save the Redwoods League for quickly coming to the rescue... and for working with us to permanently protect the redwoods."

## ***128 years old***

The 128-year-old railroad has ferried generations of people through the spectacular redwood-covered coastal mountains. The 40-mile system pours about \$20 million into the Mendocino County economy.

The locomotives, railroad cars and equipment were stranded in April when Tunnel No. 1 collapsed, covering a 40-foot section of the track 300 feet inside the east portal with thousands of tons of rubble. The train rides have since been limited to a tiny 3.5 mile section of track east of Fort Bragg.

Pinoli, who did not have the money to fix the tunnel, attempted to raise money, but came up short. He was considering selling some of the redwoods along the route to logging interests when Save the Redwoods stepped in.

Harry Pollack, the league's chief operating officer and acting executive director, said the \$300,000 gives his organization the option to buy either a conservation easement or public access easement along the 100-foot wide, 40-mile long railroad right of way between Fort Bragg and Willits.

"He will use the money to open the tunnel and we will have the land appraised and figure out in the coming year what we want to buy," Pollack said. "The \$300,000 will be a credit toward the purchase price."

## ***Acres in private hands***

The league has a strong interest in the area after buying 426 acres of redwood forest along the Skunk Train route two years ago. That property, in the lush Noyo River canyon, was then the largest swath of old-growth forest still in private hands on the West Coast.

The Mendocino Land Trust has since paid a discounted price of \$4 million for the land, where officials hope to ferry biologists, nature lovers and others by train for interpretive hikes.

"Public access was an important reason for buying that property, so securing public access along the entire Skunk Train route fits in with our priorities," Pollack said.

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*The Skunk Train's diesel locomotive emerges from Tunnel #1 (now closed) and crosses the Noyo River as kayakers paddle back towards Noyo Harbor. The Skunk train offers a "Tracks to Kayaks" trip in the late spring, summer and early fall.*

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/science/article/Conservation-group-helps-save-Skunk-Train-4608352.php>