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Supes approve Elk River restoration grant

Community Choice Aggregation ordinance moves forward

By Will Houston, Eureka Times-Standard

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As part of an extensive effort to restore decades' worth of impacts to the mud-choked Elk River, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a nearly \$175,000 grant to allow the watershed's stakeholders to come up with solutions.

Longtime Elk River resident Kristi Wrigley said she has been addressing this issue for nearly 20 years, and said that this is the first time the board has shown concern.

“Though we do appreciate it, it is a long while in coming,” Wrigley said.

Earlier in the meeting, the board voted unanimously to move forward with an ordinance that would join them with Community Choice Aggregation energy program in order to utilize local renewable energy sources and to set competitive power rates with Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

Elk River grant

Historic logging in the Elk River watershed, such as clear-cutting and road construction, allowed sediment to leech into the river for several decades, but the effects did not begin to become noticeable until the 1980s.

Local farmers, such as Wrigley, noticed their fields and homes were flooding. Roads closed for days at a time as the mud-clogged river became shallower and shallower. Water lines both for drinking and agriculture were blocked up by sediment.

The river, which flows into Humboldt Bay 20 miles from its eastern headwaters south of Eureka, was listed as an officially impaired waterway in 1998 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board recently adopted an outline plan of how to stop further sediment impacts and is considering restrictions on the Humboldt Redwood Company's logging practices in the watershed. The [company states it is not contributing to the problem](#).

Humboldt County Deputy Public Works Director Hank Seemann said that the state's regulations are only one of three Elk River restoration efforts.

The proposed grant funding that went before the board of supervisors Tuesday will fund a Elk River Watershed Stewardship Program that Seemann said is designed to identify partnerships and restoration projects along the river for the next two years.

The program, which is set to have its first public meeting on June 30, will divide into working groups to

address issues relating to water quality, health and safety, and address other issues such as water supplies and road flooding.

“The stewardship program is intended to support planning and implementing community oriented projects,” Seemann said.

The program will lean on a third component of the Elk River restoration effort — a technical study by CalTrout detailing which areas of the river should have sediment removed.

Elk River resident Jerry Martien said he and other members of the Friends of the Elk River organization support this collaborative program, but with significant concerns still left unaddressed.

“This project is very little and very late and will be used to advertise that everything is better while residents continue to endure flooding, and fish populations struggle to survive,” he said.

Martien said he is also concerned that the projects could lead to more development in the watershed’s agricultural communities and will also lack restrictions on contemporary logging operations.

“We hope these outcomes can be avoided,” he said.

Wrigley, whose family has resided in the North Fork Elk River watershed for about 100 years, said residents are being asked to compromise with logging industries that she said have led to her and nearly three dozen neighbors being unable to farm their land due to flooding.

“We have been robbed entirely of the use of our land,” she said.

Third District Supervisor and board Chairman Mark Lovelace said this program is a necessary step in restoring the river, and has been needed for some time.

“It was a really, really clear back then that this river is broken and beyond the ability of natural processes to repair it,” he said.

The board voted to approve the \$174,956 in grant funding to support the program, which included large contributions by the UC Cooperative Extension and CalTrout.

The stewardship program’s first public meeting is set for June 30 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Humboldt County Agricultural Center at 5630 South Broadway in Eureka.

Community Choice Aggregation

As expected, the board voted unanimously to move forward with a local energy program known as Community Choice Aggregation. The state program allows local jurisdictions to procure their own power and set their own power rates to compete with local utilities such as PG&E.

If the program moves forward as planned in 2017, PG&E would still be responsible for metering, billing, outage response and infrastructure maintenance.

The Board of Supervisors has been considering joining the program for over a year. With the unincorporated county area making up over half the county’s energy load, the county’s participation in the program is critical in order for the program to work, according to Redwood Coast Energy Authority Executive Director Matthew Marshall.

Arcata and Fortuna have also signed on to the program, Marshall said, with more municipalities expected to join.

The Redwood Coast Energy (RCEA) — a joint powers authority composed of local government representatives from Humboldt County, Arcata, Blue Lake, Eureka, Ferndale, Fortuna, Rio Dell and Trinidad, as well as the Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District — will manage the program.

A nonprofit company, The Energy Authority, was hired by RCEA earlier this year to operate the program as well as work to procure the power from local sources, such as biomass plants.

Local residents in participating communities will still have the ability to opt out of the program if they wish to remain with PG&E.

The Community Choice Aggregation ordinance must still go before the board at a future meeting for final approval.

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