FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 18, 2023

CONTACT
Severn Williams, sev@publicgoodpr.com
510-336-9566

Federal Infrastructure Funds Targeted to Help Improve Fish Passage on Ótakim Séwi (Big Chico Creek)

Bidwell Park project will benefit native fish, wildlife, plants and create up to 60 local jobs

CHICO, Calif. – Nonprofit research and conservation organization California Trout (CalTrout), the Mechoopda Indian Tribe of Chico Rancheria, California State University, Chico Ecological Reserves, and other key partners announced today that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has targeted funds to improve fish passage on Ótakim Séwi (Big Chico Creek), east of the City of Chico. The project will remove a fish passage barrier in Iron Canyon, restoring access to more than 8 miles of critically needed spawning and rearing habitat for steelhead and spring-run Chinook salmon in the upper reaches of the creek, including cold water habitat critical for climate resilience. The project will also provide benefits for Big Chico Creek's non-salmonid native fish community, taking an entire ecosystem-based approach to restoration. The project is one of only 36 projects targeted by NOAA and was secured through a highly competitive grant application process.

"NOAA has identified this project as a top priority to recover spring-run Chinook salmon in the Central Valley," said Damon Goodman, CalTrout's Shasta-Klamath Regional Director. "We will be working with the Mechoopda Tribe, the Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve, and our other municipal, agency, university and private partners to make sure the project also benefits the entire watershed and all its inhabitants, including the people of Chico who are devoted to Bidwell Park. I'm excited to be a part of this team, taking an ecosystem-based approach to restore the native fish populations in Big Chico Creek."

Because these ocean-going migratory fish are keystone species, the entire ecosystem of upper Bidwell Park will be revitalized as fish populations rebound, ultimately benefiting raptors, bears and other natural fish predators and bringing nutrients up from the ocean to enrich the soil and native plants.

The creek runs through Bidwell Park, a large rural park managed by the City of Chico and heavily used by local residents and students from Chico State University. This much-loved park stretches up into the hills east of Chico and provides recreational opportunities including hiking, biking, horseback riding, swimming, birding, and naturalizing. In addition to NOAA's listing, the fish passage project is considered a top priority in the Bidwell Park Master Management Plan and in CDFW's Fish Passage Priorities list.

The project has a strong community outreach and education component, providing benefits to students at Chico State University and Butte Community College, as well as K-12 students and the public. Located in a municipal park that is visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year, this project has the ability to reach a diverse audience, providing insight into Traditional Ecological Knowledge practices, habitat restoration, and fish passage remedies. In addition, 1,400 local students will be engaged in the restoration effort every year of the project, giving them a personal connection to Big Chico Creek and building a long-lasting conservation ethic.

In the first phase of the Iron Canyon Fish Passage Project, a local engineering firm will work on project design and conduct hydrological and topographic surveys, and a local environmental consulting firm will work on permitting and planning tasks. On-the-ground work will entail removing an 80-year-old non-functioning fishway that was damaged during an old earthquake, completely blocking fish passage. Additionally, a section of the stream channel will be reconfigured to mimic a natural channel form that will be passable by salmon and steelhead even at low stream flows and will require no future maintenance. The project will fund more than 60 local jobs from a wide range of disciplines, from engineering, surveying and construction to science and education.

“We will be consulting with CalTrout at every stage of the project, and our Traditional Ecological Knowledge crew will get native plants established once the fish barriers are removed,” said Kyle McHenry, Mechoopda Indian Tribe Cultural Director and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. “We will also be involved in the educational aspect of the project. The end goal for us is to give our kids a sense of connection to this place and to our ancestors, who lived here and were stewards of the land and waters. Salmon have sustained our people for thousands of years and they are the reason we are alive today. They are a part of our DNA. Being able to see this project go through to help out the salmon and to see them thrive is paramount for the Tribe.”

Traditional Ecological Knowledge is the deep knowledge of landscapes, lifeforms and natural cycles, acquired over thousands of years by the people indigenous to a region. Mainstream scientists in recent years have come to recognize the value of this traditional wisdom in understanding and responding to major threats such as wildfire, loss of native species, and climate change.

CalTrout completed a similar fish passage project in 2021 in a neighboring watershed at Eagle Canyon in Battle Creek, providing a successful model for this project.

“Everything we do at Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve centers on the health of the watershed,” said Eli Goodsell, director of Chico State University’s Ecological Reserves. “We are excited to be collaborating with CalTrout on this project to help bring back healthy native fish populations, which will in turn support our birds of prey and mammalian predators and will ultimately impact multiple aspects of the food web.”

“I'm really happy to be working with CalTrout, the Mechoopda Tribe, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, and the City of Chico,” Goodsell

added. “We might all look at things differently, but at the end of the day we have a shared goal. Organizations, agencies, and nonprofits need to recognize that we can support each other to bring about a win across the board. I think that’s what we have to realize to solve challenges in the American West.”

For more information and to watch a video about the project, please go to the Iron Canyon Fish Passage Project on the CalTrout website.

About California Trout

California Trout partners with numerous government agencies, Tribes, and conservation groups to conduct research, habitat restoration and advocacy, to restore vibrance and abundance to California’s freshwater ecosystems and to keep them that way for years to come. Founded in 1971, CalTrout has been working for more than 50 years to protect salmon and steelhead strongholds, reconnect fish habitat, integrate fish and working lands, steward source water areas, and restore estuaries.

The Iron Canyon Fish Passage Project is serving as the flagship project for CalTrout’s new Mt. Lassen region. The region has a physical office in Chico and joins CalTrout’s six other regional offices across California, a legislative/policy office in Sacramento, and CalTrout headquarters in San Francisco. By positioning CalTrout in key geographical areas where wild fish influence the community, the organization is suited to implement large-scale conservation projects for the benefit of California’s fish, water, and people. In addition to the Iron Canyon project, CalTrout staff in the Mt. Lassen region will be leading habitat restoration and fish passage improvement projects in the Battle Creek watershed which historically supported winter-run Chinook salmon, now federally endangered.

###