



News Release

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Spring Creeks, Habitat and Ancestral Lands Permanently Conserved in the South Fork Kern River Valley

Kern County, CA – A 2,285-acre oasis in the Southern Sierra, complete with spring-fed creeks, native trout and a natural warm spring, was permanently protected when Western Rivers Conservancy transferred ownership of the former Fay Creek Ranch to the Tübatulabal Tribe and the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation.

Western Rivers Conservancy entered into an agreement to purchase the ranch in 2021. Working together with the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation and the tribe to permanently conserve this rare desert refuge, WRC was able to secure funding from California’s Wildlife Conservation Board and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. With the ranch conveyance, the Tübatulabal Tribe will become the owner and steward of 1,246 acres of the northeastern portion of the property, along with its critical habitat and important cultural sites. The tribe has named the newly repatriated lands *Kwolokam*, meaning “duck place.” The Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation now owns the 1,039-acre southwestern portion.

“The Fay Creek Tübatulabal Ancestral Lands are an important example of environmentally significant lands and waters, and this acquisition marks a historic land-back project to one of California’s many Native American populations,” said Rebecca Fris, acting director for the Wildlife Conservation Board. “WCB is proud to work in partnership to protect these important lands for wildlife and tribal use.”

Together, the new long-term stewards will manage the property to conserve outstanding fish and wildlife habitat and to preserve invaluable cultural sites. The Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation and the tribe also plan to manage the property for public access, adding to numerous existing recreation opportunities on adjacent protected lands.

Located in the transition zone between the High Sierra and the Mojave Desert, Fay Creek Ranch is a unique refuge within an otherwise hot, arid landscape. The property is home to several fresh-water springs, a warm spring, and 1.5 miles of Fay Creek itself, a tributary to the South Fork of the Kern.

Fay Creek is a crucial perennial cold-water stream for native trout, and the surrounding riparian vegetation offers excellent habitat for southwestern willow flycatcher, California condor and least Bell's vireo, all federally endangered birds. The South Fork Kern River valley, where the property is located, is considered a Globally Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, as it contains vital habitat for a diverse array of bird species, many of which are endangered.

Fay Creek Ranch is surrounded by protected areas, including the Sequoia National Forest, Hanning Flat Preserve, Audubon Kern River Preserve, Canebrake Ecological Reserve and Bureau of Land Management lands. The Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation owns and manages Hanning Flat, a 3,800-acre preserve adjacent to Fay Creek Ranch. This conveyance will expand Hanning Flat and provide new access to the existing preserve.

"The Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation would like to express their sincere appreciation to Peter Colby and the entire Western Rivers Conservancy team for all their hard work and diligence necessary to accomplish this most exciting acquisition," said Bruce Vegter, president of the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation. "With this latest acquisition, the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation will now be responsible for stewardship of over 6,000 acres of unspoiled terrain in and around the Kern River Valley. We look forward to expanding our programs of habitat conservation, while still allowing public access to enjoy our work and observe and experience the wonders nature has to offer."

Two trails run through the property, linking the valley floor with the high Kern Plateau. These trails were historically used by the Tübatulabal Tribe, who inhabited the land that is now Fay Creek Ranch for centuries before the arrival of Europeans. In recent years, the trails were closed to the public. Both the Tübatulabal Tribe and the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation intend to reopen the property and trails for compatible public recreation.

"The Tübatulabals of Kern Valley want to take this time to thank everyone involved in supporting our efforts to repatriate ancestral land known in our culture as *Kwolokam*, which means 'duck place,'" said Robert Gomez, chairman of the Tübatulabal Tribe. "The upper reaches of Fay Creek are known to the Tribe as *no koi, no koi, ya pal*, which means 'the meandering water.'"

The ranch is located directly between the North and South Forks of the Kern River, roughly seven miles northeast of Isabella Lake. Originating in the pristine high country of the Sierra Nevada, the North and South Forks of the Kern are both designated as Wild and Scenic along the entirety of their lengths until they meet at Isabella Lake. Below the lake, the mainstem of the Kern flows southwest through rocky canyons and is a major attraction for people seeking hot springs, exciting whitewater and a respite from the Southern California sun.

"In the middle of this arid landscape, these natural springs on Fay Creek Ranch come seemingly out of nowhere and support an array of fish and wildlife that otherwise wouldn't be here," said

Peter Colby, California program director for Western Rivers Conservancy. “Permanently preserving this place and completing the assemblage of conserved lands in this area is a tremendous accomplishment.”

With the completion of this project, Western Rivers Conservancy, the Tübatulabal Tribe and the Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation have together added an outstanding property to a broader conservation assemblage, helping to protect the integrity of a critical wildlife corridor at the southern tip of the Sierra Nevada permanently.

“Returning ancestral lands, improving access, and permanently protecting rich wildlife habitat is a perfect fit with our triple bottom line mission to serve the Sierra Nevada,” added Sierra Nevada Conservancy executive officer Angela Avery. “We’re grateful for the opportunity to support the Tübatulabal Tribe, Western Rivers Conservancy, and Kern River Valley Heritage Foundation in making this project a reality.”

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