

**Regional Water Quality Control Board
North Coast Region
Staff Summary Report
August 14, 2025**

ITEM: 3

SUBJECT: Workshop on the Gualala River Watershed Sediment TMDL Action Plan

BOARD ACTION: No formal action will be taken by the North Coast Water Board. The Board will solicit comments from interested parties and may provide comments or direction to staff.

BACKGROUND:

The Gualala River flows into the Pacific Ocean near the Town of Gualala approximately 114 miles north of San Francisco. The Gualala River watershed drains approximately 298 square miles, or 190,720 acres, of mostly mountainous and rugged terrain in both Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. The Mendocino-Sonoma County boundary runs down the center of the mainstem Gualala River. The Gualala River watershed is within the Northern California/Southern Oregon Coasts Evolutionary Significant Unit (ESU) for coho salmon and steelhead trout. In 1996 and 2000, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed coho salmon and steelhead trout, respectively, in this ESU as threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

In 1994, the entire Gualala River watershed was listed on section 303(d) of the federal Clean Water Act as impaired for excessive sedimentation/siltation. Excessive sediment in the Gualala River watershed impairs Beneficial Uses associated with the Gualala River's salmonid fishery, specifically: Commercial or Sport Fishing (COMM), Cold Freshwater Habitat (COLD), Estuarine Habitat (EST), Migration of Aquatic Organisms (MIGR), and Spawning, Reproduction, and/or Early Development (SPWN). In 2001, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for sediment in the Gualala River Watershed, supported by the *Gualala River Watershed Technical Support Document for Sediment* (TSD) developed by North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (North Coast Water Board) staff.

In 2005, the North Coast Water Board adopted, as an amendment to the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast Region (Basin Plan), the Sediment TMDL Implementation Policy. The Sediment TMDL Implementation Policy states that the North Coast Water Board will rely upon all its existing authorities and programs to implement TMDLs established for sediment impaired waters in the North Coast Region. The Sediment TMDL Implementation Policy also envisioned that, at the Executive Officer's discretion, U.S. EPA established TMDLs would be brought before the North Coast Water Board for future consideration as amendments to the Basin Plan.

Pursuant to section 13242 of the California Water Code (Water Code), North Coast Water Board staff have developed the *Action Plan for the Gualala River Sediment*

TMDL (Action Plan) and Staff Report Supporting the Gualala River Sediment TMDL Action Plan (Staff Report). The Action Plan and Staff Report reference and summarize key components of the Gualala River Sediment TMDL and the TSD. The Action Plan and Staff Report provide an implementation strategy to achieve the TMDL load allocations through various measures to manage sediment sources and attain water quality standards. The Action Plan is an amendment to the Basin Plan. On July 11, 2025, the North Coast Water Board opened a 45-day public comment and review period for the Action Plan and Staff Report. The public comment and review period will close on August 25, 2025.

DISCUSSION:

This TMDL process involves three parts: 1) listing the Gualala River as impaired, 2) setting the TMDL to determine the allowable pollutant loads and load reductions needed by source category and subwatershed, and 3) developing an implementation program to achieve the TMDL. A consent decree (*Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, et al. v. Marcus*, No. 95-4474 MHP, 11 March 1997) required the TMDL to be established by December 2001. While an implementation plan is not a strict requirement of the federal Clean Water Act, it is a requirement of the California Water Code.

The Action Plan and Staff Report provide no new scientific data but instead summarize and reinforce the scientific analyses, findings, and assumptions already established in the TSD. However, staff have performed an assessment of data collected from 1997 through 2023 by the Gualala River Watershed Council. This data assessment is documented in Appendix E of the Staff Report. The Action Plan is designed to implement the U.S. EPA established Gualala River Sediment TMDL as it was originally written, without introducing new analyses, assumptions, or modifications. Information from the Gualala River Sediment TMDL and TSD include the sediment source analysis; source- and subwatershed-specific load allocations; and numeric targets and indicators. The sources identified comprise natural landslides and streambank erosion; road-related landslides, gullies, and surface erosion; road-stream crossing failures; and skid trail surface erosion and other timber harvest-related sediment delivery. The sediment TMDL established by U.S. EPA is 475 tons per square mile per year.

The implementation actions described in the Action Plan and Staff Report are organized by topic or land use activity and responsible party. Actions include complying with waste discharge requirements (WDRs) for timber harvest, road maintenance, and construction activities; conducting road maintenance and construction in compliance with permits and best management practices; and monitoring and reporting to ensure adherence to sediment controls and water quality standards. Monitoring efforts focus on hillslope conditions and the effectiveness of sediment reduction projects in addition to the water quality indicators reiterated from the TMDL and TSD. Because road-related sources comprise approximately 84.5 percent of the anthropogenic sediment, staff also propose the development and implementation of a new permit to address road-related sediment discharge from private lands, unrelated to timber harvest plans. The draft permit is currently scheduled for spring 2026 with an adoption hearing in the fall of 2026. The

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Staff Report includes sections that consider the economic impact of the TMDL and the compliance costs associated with reducing road-related sediment discharges.

Public participation in the Basin Plan amendment process included public meetings and correspondence with interested parties and individuals in the watershed. These parties include Gualala Redwood Timber, Gualala River Watershed Council, Redwood Empire (a division of Pacific States Industries, Inc.), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Jackson Family Wines. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.3.1 and Water Code section 189.7, North Coast Water Board staff also performed outreach to tribal entities and disadvantaged communities for consultation. Staff have not received responses from these parties prior to the Action Plan and Staff Report public comment period. The public comment and review period ends on August 25, 2025, and the Basin Plan amendment adoption hearing is scheduled for December 4 or 5, 2025.

RECOMMENDATION: Not applicable.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

1. Notice of Public Comment Opportunity, Board Workshop, and Public Hearing to Consider Adoption of a Basin Plan Amendment Regarding the *Action Plan for the Gualala River Sediment Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL)*
2. Draft *Action Plan for the Gualala River Sediment TMDL*
3. Draft *Staff Report Supporting the Gualala River Sediment TMDL Action Plan* and appendices