Conservation group helps save Skunk Train

Robert Pinoli, owner of the Skunk Train railroad, stands outside the entrance of a tunnel which collapsed in April along the line between Fort Bragg and Willits.

PD FILE, 2013

By SEAN SCULLY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
Published: Wednesday, June 19, 2013 at 10:01 a.m.
Last Modified: Wednesday, June 19, 2013 at 10:08 a.m.

Mendocino County's endangered Skunk Train will return to full operation by mid-July after a conservation group stepped forward to fund the repair of a collapsed tunnel that had threatened to permanently shutter the popular tourist attraction.

San Francisco-based Save the Redwoods League will pay $300,000 for an option to buy all or part of the redwood-lined right along the 40-mile route between Fort Bragg and Willits. That money will allow the Skunk Train owner, Mendocino Railway, to clear out the tunnel just east of Fort Bragg that collapsed in April.

The deal is a natural fit for the conservation group, said Harry Pollack, chief operating officer and acting executive director of the League. The group spent $7 million in 2011 to buy a 426-acre piece of forest along the rail line near Willits and the train is the main public access to that land.

"We're very lucky it's there," he said. The train "is a community resource as well as a historic resource."

The deal comes just in time for the Skunk Train, which has been restricted by the collapse to a just a short run between its Fort Bragg headquarters and the tunnel. Without the funds to clear the debris, the train was facing the loss of the entire lucrative summer season. That could have forced the operation to lay off staff or shut down entirely.

Skunk Train owner Robert Pinoli said he expects to begin clearing work within days and to have full service restored by the middle of July. All 40 of his full- and part-time staff will be back on full schedules by then.

He had been trying to raise the money for the repairs online and through sales of season and lifetime passes. That effort had brought in about $105,000, far short of the $300,000 needed to clear the tunnel.

Save the Redwoods League now has a year to determine what portions of the 110-foot-wide right of way to purchase, Pollack said. It is likely the group will buy a conservation easement along at least some of the line to protect the trees in perpetuity. It could, however, go as far as buying the right of way outright.

Because the League has yet to survey the full length of the line and get land appraisals, it is unclear how much the final deal might be worth. Regardless, it would be a windfall for the train, Pinoli said.

The company's limited reserves were drained by a major mudslide in 2006 that closed the Fort Bragg tunnel, and by a month-long manhunt for a wanted killer in the area in 2011 that resulted in $200,000 in lost revenue and costs in assisting law enforcement agencies.

"We're not sure how this will play out in the end," Pinoli said, "but we're quite certain that in the end it will be a win-win for everybody."

The Skunk Train was formerly a freight line serving the timber industry. Over the years, it became an increasingly important passenger connection and tourist attraction through the area, but it fell on hard times as the timber industry declined. The previous owners filed for bankruptcy in 2003. Pinoli, a longtime employee, and other investors bought the line a year later.

The train is the top commercial tourist attraction in Mendocino County, with about 40,000 passengers per year. Tourism officials at both end of the line had worried that the train might be forced to shut down if the tunnel could not be cleared.

Pinoli said he had considered selling some of the timber along the rail line to fund the cleanup, but he did not relish seeing any of the redwoods cut down. That led him to approach the League about a conservation-based solution.

"I had trees I could have leveraged," he said, "but that wasn't the right answer for the long term."