

North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board

Gualala Roads Assessment Order

Frequently Asked Questions - July 2026

This document answers frequently asked questions that staff of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's (North Coast Water Board's) Watershed Assessment and Recovery Unit has received during outreach with landowners and community members on the development of an order to address sediment pollution from private, rural roads in the Gualala River Watershed.

The Gualala Roads Assessment Order (Assessment Order) would require certain landowners in the watershed to inventory, assess, and prioritize rural roads on their property.

The draft Gualala Road Assessment Order was released for public review on July 8, 2026 and comments will be accepted through August 14, 2026. The North Coast Water Board will consider adopting the Assessment Order in December 2026.

Draft Assessment Order Details

1. What would the draft Assessment Order require?

The draft Assessment Order would require landowners with an aggregated total of 1,000 acres or more to comply with three primary requirements: (1) the inventory, assessment, and prioritization of rural roads, (2) the development of a Road Management and Treatment Plan, and (3) the submission of Annual Status Reports.

The inventory, assessment, and prioritization of rural roads would entail detailed evaluations of both hydrologically connected road segments and episodic sources of sediment such as stream crossings and road fill failures.

Road Management and Treatment Plans would be developed from assessment findings and would describe existing and potential sediment discharge sites and the measures necessary to prevent or minimize the discharge of sediment.

Annual Status Reports would provide information on the portion of a road network that has already been assessed, the portion expected to be assessed in the near future, and the expected completion date of Road Management and Treatment Plans.

2. How does the draft Assessment Order define "rural roads"?

Rural roads are defined in the draft Assessment Order as:

Low-volume roads¹ generally located in forested and rangeland settings that serve residential, recreational, and resource management uses. They are throughgoing and contiguous or have a terminal landing that allows for equipment or truck turnarounds.² They include permanently maintained roads, seasonal use roads, and abandoned historic roads³ that have not been properly decommissioned. These roads have been constructed using natural materials such as native soil, gravel, or crushed rock, rather than asphalt or concrete.

Skid trails, which are temporary and discontinuous paths or benches developed to yard or “skid” logs to mainline roads or landings, are **not** considered rural roads for the purposes of the draft Assessment Order.

3. When would landowners have to meet the requirements of the Assessment Order?

The draft Assessment Order includes the following compliance timeline.

- **March 1, 2027:** deadline for landowners to express interest in contract-funded assessment support.
- **July 1, 2027:** first Annual Status Report is due. Requests to use existing road assessments to reduce the scope of the Assessment Order must be submitted with this first report.
- **July 1, annually:** Annual Status Reports due each year until a complete Road Management and Treatment Plan is approved by the North Coast Water Board.
- **April 1, 2030:** complete Road Management and Treatment Plans are due.

4. Who would conduct assessments in compliance with the draft Assessment Order?

Qualifying landowners who accept the North Coast Water Board’s contracting support will have their assessments conducted at no cost to them by one of two contractors: the Sonoma Resource Conservation District (Sonoma RCD) or Pacific Watershed Associates.

Landowners who do not receive assessment support will have to pay out-of-pocket to conduct assessments independently. These landowners will be able to choose their preferred contractor, provided they meet the following criteria to serve as a Qualified Professional: (a) possession of relevant experience in the evaluation of rural road design

¹ “Low-volume road” is defined in draft Order Attachment C: Definitions and Acronyms and in [Weaver and Hagans, 2015: Handbook for Forest, Ranch and Rural Roads](https://www.pacificwatershed.com/sites/default/files/RoadsEnglishBOOKapril2015b.pdf) (<https://www.pacificwatershed.com/sites/default/files/RoadsEnglishBOOKapril2015b.pdf>).

² Absence of a terminal landing is often indicative of skid trails rather than rural roads.

³ Abandoned roads are those roads on which measures have been taken to remove them from the permanent road network. Abandoned historic roads may not have been used for decades but still exist on the landscape and have sediment delivery potential.

and erosional processes AND (b) one or more of the following credentials: (1) successful completion of the Ranch Water Quality Planning Short Course, (2) Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control, (3) Registered Professional Forester license, (4) Professional Geologist license, (5) Certified Engineering Geologist license, (6) Professional Civil Engineer license, or (7) other relevant credential(s) to be considered for approval by the Executive Officer of the North Coast Water Board.

5. What constitutes an approved road assessment protocol?

Landowners who conduct independent road assessments may either use the Evaluation Methodology, which serves as a pre-approved road assessment protocol, or submit an alternative protocol for approval by the Executive Officer of the North Coast Water Board. Alternate road assessment protocols may be published protocols existing in the public sphere or those developed by a property owner for in-house use.

Alternative protocols must incorporate the following elements: (1) development of site maps that show the full extent of road networks and sediment discharge sites, (2) descriptions of current road conditions, (3) identification of hydrologically connected road segments, (4) descriptions of existing and potential sediment discharge sites, (5) identification of failing or improperly designed stream crossings and fish passages, (6) descriptions of upslope and downslope drainage, and (7) descriptions of how road treatment priorities are considered.

6. How would past road assessments be credited toward compliance with the Assessment Order?

Landowners who have previously completed road assessments may request a reduction in the scope of required assessments. Previously completed assessments must have been completed within 10 years of the request date or otherwise demonstrated to remain valid, must have been conducted using an approved road assessment protocol, and must have been conducted under the responsible charge of a Qualified Professional as defined in the draft Order and detailed in FAQ #4 above.

7. When would the Assessment Order be considered final?

The Assessment Order would be issued to applicable landowners after a public review process and if adopted by the North Coast Water Board. The public review period began on July 8, 2026 and closes on August 14, 2026. The North Coast Water Board will consider adopting the Assessment Order at the December 2026 Board Meeting.

8. How does the draft Assessment Order apply to ownerships covered by other water quality permits, such as timberlands?

The Assessment Order is designed to fill the gaps in regulatory coverage of rural roads. Some existing permits, such as waste discharge requirements for timber harvests, include robust road requirements. Road assessments conducted for compliance with existing regulatory permits can be submitted to the North Coast Water Board to reduce the scope of assessments required of the Assessment Order.

Order Background

9. Why are roads the focus of water quality conditions in the Gualala River Watershed?

Unpaved rural roads and their stream crossings can cause significant water quality problems when they lack proper drainage and erosion control measures. Hydrologically connected roads serve as chronic sources of sediment while failing and undersized stream crossings are examples of episodic sediment sources. Without efforts to reduce hydrologic connectivity (i.e., eliminating direct water flow paths from road surfaces to streams) and repair stream crossings that are at risk of failure, these rural roads can continuously deliver sediment to streams, increase the risk of stream diversions and associated erosion, deliver large amounts of sediment when stream crossings fail, disrupt the movement and habitat of fish and wildlife, and degrade the quality of surface water for residential, municipal, and agricultural uses.

The Gualala River Watershed is impaired with sediment. More than 85% of the human-caused sediment pollution originates from roads. While permits that regulate roads are already in place, for example, those that regulate timber harvests or vineyard operations, a gap in coverage exists wherein private, rural roads not covered by those other permits remain unaddressed by Water Board regulations. The Road Management and Treatment Plans that would be required of the draft Assessment Order would provide information about what work has already been completed in the watershed and where work is still needed.

10. How would the Assessment Order help improve water quality?

The Assessment Order aims to minimize sediment pollution from a significant portion of rural roads in the watershed, eliminating sediment pollution at their sources and improving watershed function and ecosystem health. Management and Treatment Plans developed for Assessment Order compliance will provide landowners and the North Coast Water

Board with information necessary to assess the risk of sediment delivery from the landowner's roads and identify actions necessary to mitigate or eliminate the risk.

11. Why does the draft Assessment Order apply only to landowners with property of 1,000 acres or more?

Using ownership size as a threshold for order applicability allows the North Coast Water Board to maximize the total length of roads addressed by the Assessment Order while maintaining a manageable number of ownerships for whom staff can provide meaningful support in navigating order compliance.

The 1,000-acre threshold applies to 26 landowners and incorporates nearly two thirds of all roads in the watershed, a portion great enough to make meaningful progress toward the necessary 89% reduction in road-related sediment loads.⁴

If the Executive Officer of the North Coast Water Board determines that an ownership of less than 1,000-acres poses a risk to water quality, a separate Water Code section 13267 may be issued to the landowner.

12. What does a road assessment entail?

Road assessments would consist of inventories and assessments of all applicable road segments and will evaluate hydrologic connectivity and episodic sources of sediment such as stream crossings and road fill failures. Assessment findings would be used to develop Road Management and Treatment Plans that prioritize sites for future treatment

Road Management and Treatment Plans would include site maps showing the full extent of the road network and stream crossings, descriptions of current road conditions and use classification, descriptions of road-related management activities that may impact sediment delivery potential, an inventory of all road-related sediment discharge sites, a description of measures to prevent or minimize sediment discharge, and a prioritization of all road-related sediment discharge sites.

13. What kind of regulatory order is the Assessment Order?

The Assessment Order is a Water Code section 13267 informational order requiring the submission of road assessment data in the form of a Road Management and Treatment Plan. Water Code section 13267 grants Regional Water Boards the authority to investigate persons that discharge waste or are suspected of discharging waste through requirements

⁴ For details on load allocations and load reductions, see section 5.2 of the US Environmental Protection Agency's Gualala River Total Maximum Daily Load for Sediment: [Gualala River Total Maximum Daily Load for Sediment](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/tmdls/gualala_river/110707/gualalafinaltmdl.pdf) (https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/tmdls/gualala_river/110707/gualalafinaltmdl.pdf).

to submit technical reports related to the discharge. Sediment discharged from rural roads is a discharge, or suspected discharge of waste, and owners of those roads are responsible for these discharges. Unlike Waste Discharge Requirement permits, informational orders do not include fees for application or enrollment.

14. Does the Assessment Order apply to county roads?

No, county roads continue to be regulated through a separate program that uses the 5C Road Management Waiver. Community members with concerns about sediment pollution from county roads are encouraged to contact the program liaison, Maggie Robinson, at maggie.robinson@waterboards.ca.gov.

15. What kind of public process will take place in order development?

The Assessment Order is scheduled for public review July 13, 2026⁵ – August 14, 2026, in advance of a December 2026 adoption hearing. A public workshop will be held on July 23, 2026.

Public engagement on the Assessment Order also includes an ongoing series of community meetings held every few months, recurring informal staff office hours, and one-on-one engagement upon request.

Cost of Compliance and Landowner Support

16. What are the expected costs of compliance with the Assessment Order?

As noted above, the North Coast Water Board has contract funding available to support Gualala landowners in completing road assessments and Road Management and Treatment Plan development required of the Assessment Order. Landowners who decline or do not qualify for this support⁶ will be required to conduct assessments independently at rates that could range from \$3,685/mile to \$4,800/mile.⁷

⁵ The draft Assessment Order was released to the public early on July 8, 2026.

⁶ If demand for assessment support exceeds the capacity of the available funds, the North Coast Water Board may need to establish assessment support priorities that determine which properties will qualify for support. These priorities could be based on relative risk to water quality on a subwatershed basis. The Prioritization Assessment Report developed by the Sonoma RCD may be used as a tool to guide this prioritization.

⁷ Estimates of assessment cost varies based on the density of a road network and the road management class, e.g., maintained, seasonal, or abandoned roads. See [draft Order Attachment D: Calculations of Estimated Assessment Costs](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/gualala_roads/pdf/2026/Draft_R1-2026-0041_Attach_D.pdf) (https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/gualala_roads/pdf/2026/Draft_R1-2026-0041_Attach_D.pdf) for details.

17. What support does the North Coast Water Board have available for landowners subject to the Assessment Order?

The North Coast Water Board has secured \$5 million in contract funding to support Gualala landowners. These funds are being used to (1) develop technical reports that determine contemporary watershed conditions, prioritize subwatersheds for resource allocation, and inform assessment methodologies, (2) conduct community outreach, (3) provide landowner trainings on road improvement techniques, and (4) conduct on-the-ground road assessments.

The North Coast Water Board employs a Grant Coordinator who can assist applicants in navigating the federal 319(h) Grant Program that provides funding for eligible projects that address nonpoint sources of pollution such as roads. Contact RB1-Gualala@waterboards.ca.gov to be connected with our Grant Coordinator.

18. What happens if a landowner denies the North Coast Water Board and their contractors access to their property for assessments?

Neither North Coast Water Board staff nor their contractors will access properties without the consent of landowners. If a landowner chooses to accept contract-funded assessment support, the terms of property access will be detailed in a land access agreement between the landowner and North Coast Water Board contractor(s). Land access agreements will describe the duration of the agreement, frequency of property visits, terms of notice in advance of property access, use of assessment data, and indemnification terms.

19. What is the Sonoma RCD's role in order development?

The Sonoma RCD is **not** involved in regulatory decision-making and does not have a role in developing the content of the Assessment Order or regionwide roads order.

The Sonoma RCD is tasked with developing technical reports that will inform assessment methodologies, conducting community outreach, providing landowner trainings, and conducting road assessments.

20. What is the TAC's role in order development?

The TAC is **not** involved in regulatory decision-making and does not have a role in developing the content of the Assessment Order or regionwide roads order.

In developing technical reports, the Sonoma RCD has established and actively manages a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that provides feedback on and ensures the scientific rigor of their reports. TAC members were selected for their expertise in rural road design and engineering, watercourse crossing design and engineering, erosion and sediment control, hydrology, fisheries biology, geology, and/or regional knowledge.

21. What documents has the Sonoma RCD prepared under contract with the North Coast Water Board?

The Sonoma RCD has developed the following documents: (1) a Watershed Conditions Report that summarizes contemporary watershed conditions, (2) a Prioritization Framework Report that describes the methodology used to prioritize subwatersheds, (3) an Prioritization Assessment Report that assesses subwatersheds using the methodology described in the Prioritization Framework Report, and (4) an Evaluation Methodology that will guide on-the-ground assessments carried out by the Sonoma RCD and Pacific Watershed Associates.

22. How will the documents the Sonoma RCD is developing be used in order development?

The watershed overview report, prioritization framework, and prioritization assessment report will primarily guide the North Coast Water Board's decision-making in distributing assessment support. Funding distribution decisions will only be necessary if more assessments are requested than can be provided with the available funds.

The Evaluation Methodology would be used to establish a recommended pre-approved assessment protocol for Assessment Order compliance. The Executive Officer of the North Coast Water Board would consider requests to use alternative protocols from those who conduct independent assessments.