

Strategic Investment Brief

Building Career Pathways for a Resilient Redwood Region

Investing in People Where They Live

A Rural, Place-Based Workforce Strategy

Economic transitions impact the overall health and wellbeing of rural communities across California. After cycles of growth and contraction in timber, fishing, and cannabis, new opportunities are emerging in the Redwood Region across health care, renewable energy, construction, working lands, and blue economy (CCRP, 2025a, pp. 67–68; Capitol Impact & CCRP, n.d.). The region brings enduring strengths to this transition: Tribal leadership and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, strong education and training partners, deep connections to land and community, and an entrepreneurial culture (CCRP, 2025a, pp. 4–6, 25, 30–32, 156; CCRP, 2025b, pp. 12, 72).

Blue economy definition – *The World Bank defines the blue economy as "the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and job creation while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems," covering sectors from fisheries and tourism to offshore renewable energy (World Bank, n.d.).*

Health and Social Assistance jobs now account for 21% of regional employment. Education Services, Health and Social Assistance, and Leisure and Hospitality are projected to account for nearly two-thirds of regional job growth through 2030. Demand for construction and skilled trades is also expected to remain strong as the region invests in housing, infrastructure, and renewable energy. These economic shifts have not affected all workers equally. Declines in manufacturing and resource extraction have disproportionately displaced men and workers without bachelor's degrees, while growing sectors often require different skills and credentials. From 2017 to 2021, prime-age unemployment in Humboldt, Mendocino, and Lake Counties was estimated at 9%, compared with 6% statewide, and reached 10% among both men and people of color (CCRP, 2025a, pp. 67–68, 136–142; CCRP, 2025b, pp. 58–62).

At the same time, local education and training capacity is not consistently keeping pace with projected demand (CCRP, 2025a, pp. 146, 149–150). These shortages are compounded by rural barriers—including distance, limited transportation and childcare, high housing costs, uneven access to training, and seasonal employment—that restrict residents' access to quality jobs and employers' ability to recruit and retain workers (CCRP, 2025a, pp. 143, 156–160, 175–176; CCRP, 2025b, pp. 140–144).

For the Redwood Region, workforce development is economic infrastructure: a place-based system connecting education and training, earn-and-learn opportunities, quality jobs, career advancement, and entrepreneurship. **Redwood Region RISE (RRRISE) and its partners are strengthening that system through pathway mapping, regional coordination and alignment, and community-led investments. Connecting and expanding these efforts will require sustained collaboration among employers, educators, workforce organizations, Tribes, community partners, and funders** (CCRP, 2025b, pp. 141–146; O'Leary et al., 2023).

A Workforce Strategy Built Around Career Pathways

In a changing, rural economy, workers cannot be expected to move in a straight line from training into a first job and then climb a single ladder within that job for the rest of their career. Effective rural career pathways help residents translate existing experience into skills employers recognize across sectors, add credentials over time, and shift careers into and within growing fields without starting over. Multiple entry points and portable skills can help prevent displacement from becoming prolonged unemployment.

The following principles shape this approach:

- **Create pathways into quality jobs:** Career pathways should lead to jobs offering adequate wages, benefits, stability, advancement, dignity, and worker voice—not simply job placement (Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program & Families and Workers Fund, n.d.).
- **Build transferable skills:** Communication, problem-solving, teamwork, adaptability, digital literacy, and safety skills help workers move across employers, industries, and seasons.
- **Create opportunities to advance:** Stackable credentials, apprenticeships, work-based learning, and upskilling allow people to earn while they learn and progress without leaving the workforce or the region.
- **Support entrepreneurship and leadership:** Approximately 98% of the region's businesses employ fewer than 50 people. In this small-business economy, entrepreneurship is both a career pathway and a source of local job creation (CCRP, 2025a, p. 66).



From 2022 through 2032, replacement needs and employment growth are projected to create approximately 18,300 openings for Home Health and Personal Care Aides, 10,710 for Food and Beverage Serving Workers, and 3,680 for Agricultural Workers (California Employment Development Department [EDD], n.d.). These occupations provide accessible entry points, but the work is often part-time, seasonal, or historically undervalued. Effective pathways connect workers in these jobs to additional skills, credentials, higher earnings, management, and business ownership.

Note: *These figures are ten-year totals for 2022–2032, not annual openings (EDD, n.d.).*

RRRISE's Career Pathway Maps show how workers can enter and advance across four priority sectors through local training, stackable credentials, work-based learning, transferable skills, and entrepreneurship (Capitol Impact & CCRP, n.d.).

What Makes the Redwood Region Different?

Rural Pathways Must Support Mobility

With small employers, seasonal industries, and geographically dispersed communities, advancement rarely follows a single ladder within one company. Workers need portable skills and opportunities to enter and reenter pathways as their circumstances and the economy change.

Fire and forestry illustrate this model: seasonal conservation work can lead to year-round careers in restoration, equipment operation, natural-resource management, and outdoor recreation, while also building skills that transfer to other industries (Capitol Impact, n.d.).

Workforce Development Builds Regional Resilience

A skilled local workforce enables the region to build housing and infrastructure, care for an aging population, restore forests, reduce wildfire risk, and expand reliable and renewable energy. Across 15 priority renewable and resilient energy occupations, the region has an estimated 2,247 annual openings, compared with approximately 487 relevant program completions each year. The difference indicates a substantial need to expand and better align local training (Capitol Impact, 2026c). Closing workforce gaps of this scale is necessary for planned investments to produce completed projects, local jobs, and lasting economic benefits.

Regional partners have begun addressing these needs through expanded training, earn-and-learn opportunities, and stronger connections among education, employers, Tribes, and communities.



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Training Must Be Place-Based

Distance can put promising careers out of reach. Construction management is an emerging regional opportunity, but no public community college or four-year program offers this training locally; the nearest program is at Chico State, more than four hours from Eureka. Operating and civil engineering are also strategic occupations, yet no two-year engineering or drafting pathway was identified as beginning at a regional community college (Capitol Impact, 2026f).

Note: *This assessment draws on publicly available and secondary data; there may be additional local training providers or emerging programs not captured through this research (Capitol Impact, 2026f).*

Health and caregiving face a similar challenge. Employment for Home Health and Personal Care Aides is projected to grow by an additional 20% through 2030, and these services must be delivered where people live. Residents need local access to training, field placements, and opportunities to advance (Capitol Impact, 2026c).

Closing these gaps will require flexible training closer to home, and options to earn-and-learn, stronger connections between educators and employers, and coordination among Tribes, colleges, workforce organizations, community partners, and industry.

Momentum Already Underway

Projects across the region are putting the career-pathway model into practice. Partners are expanding local training, addressing gaps between education and employment, and connecting workforce development to investments in health care, energy, working lands, coastal infrastructure, and the creative economy.

Health Care: Expanding Training Close to Home

Regional partners are expanding health-care training across all four counties. The Healthcare Education and Regional Training (HEART) Hub is expected to serve more than 2,500 elementary and middle-school students, up to 175 high-school and adult learners, and at least 500 community members annually (Healthcare Education and Regional Training Hub, 2026), while nursing-program capacity in Del Norte and Humboldt Counties has increased from 64 to 100 students. A regional consortium—the Redwood Region Rural Clinical Placement Network (RRRCPN), based at Cal Poly Humboldt—is also expanding clinical placements by coordinating a shared placement-matching system, recruiting and supporting preceptors, and aligning training capacity across Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, and Mendocino Counties and Tribal Lands (Cal Poly Humboldt & regional health-care partners, 2025–26; Redwood Region RISE, 2026a).

Renewable Energy: Connecting Training to Investment

Regional apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs are building the workforce needed for major energy investments. The approximately $200 million Tribal Energy Resilience and Sovereignty initiative is projected to support 449 construction jobs and 30 permanent positions, while microgrid projects are already developing local experience in renewable generation, storage, controls, and system integration (Capitol Impact, 2026a, 2026d; Redwood Region RISE, 2026; Redwood Coast Energy Authority, 2026). These employment figures are estimates from an earlier project scope; RCEA's September 2026 board packet describes a revised project scope and budget, so the figures should be confirmed against the current plan.

Note: *Employment figures for the Tribal Energy Resilience and Sovereignty initiative are projected impacts from an earlier project scope (Capitol Impact, 2026d; Redwood Coast Energy Authority, 2026).*

Working Lands: Creating Year-Round Careers

Since 2019, Redwoods Rising has raised $97.1 million for local restoration. In 2024, Redwoods Rising and the 'O Rew Redwoods Gateway supported approximately 200 jobs, with Humboldt and Del Norte County workers filling more than 90% of contractor hours among key partners (Save the Redwoods League & California State Parks, 2025). RRRISE Catalyst projects are extending this work through training, restoration, climate resilience, and Tribal and community stewardship (Redwood Region RISE, n.d.-a).

Blue Economy: Sustaining Coastal Jobs

A $3.2 million Community Economic Resilience Fund grant was awarded to the Noyo Harbor Revitalization Project for an energy-efficient ice house, marine-business training, and a community fish-market incubator. The proposed ice house was designed to serve approximately 80 commercial fishing vessels associated with 240 vessel-based jobs and 60 land-based jobs. Project partners anticipated that the investment could support a 10% increase in the harbor's fleet roster (Fishman, 2023).

Creative Economy: Building Portfolio-Based Careers

The regional Creative Economy pathway analysis projects 50% growth for Producers and Directors, with approximately 60 annual openings and median earnings of about $75,300 (Capitol Impact, 2026b). The pathway map connects foundational skills and portfolio development to project experience, entrepreneurship, and higher-level creative roles.

These efforts demonstrate both regional capacity and a need for stronger connections among programs. Many depend on time-limited grants or project-specific partnerships. Sustained investment can help residents and employers navigate them as a coordinated regional system (see the Sector One-Pagers, Redwood Region RISE, n.d.-b).

The Investment Needed to Scale Regional Career Pathways

Projects across the Redwood Region show that place-based workforce development can expand training, connect residents to growing industries, and retain more of the benefits of major investments. Scaling these efforts will require durable regional coordination beyond individual programs and short-term grants.

Continued investment should focus on five priorities:

- **Expand regional career pathways** connecting K–12 education, postsecondary training, apprenticeships, work-based learning, employment, advancement, and entrepreneurship.
- **Increase training capacity close to home**, particularly in health care, skilled trades, engineering, energy, and restoration.
- **Reduce barriers to participation** through transportation, childcare, career navigation, flexible training, and earn-and-learn opportunities.
- **Support employer, Tribal, and community leadership** in designing training, creating quality jobs, and connecting investments to local workers and businesses.
- **Strengthen regional coordination and data capacity** to identify workforce needs, align resources, measure outcomes, and expand effective programs.

The region already has strong partnerships, industry opportunities, and workable models. Sustained investment in Redwood Region RISE can connect these assets into career pathways that are easier for residents and employers to navigate.

A stronger regional workforce system will help translate growth in health care, energy, infrastructure, restoration, and other priority industries into local skills, quality jobs, stronger businesses, and greater resilience. The Redwood Region can provide a practical rural model built around local access, real employer demand, transferable skills, and coordinated regional partnerships.



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- pp. 4–6, 25, 30–32, 156: the historical discussion draws in part on the Del Norte County Historical Society and Humboldt County Historical Society; regional strengths reflect RRRISE community engagement, asset mapping, and SWOT analysis.
- p. 66: based on EDD Size of Business data; 14,072 of 14,425 regional business establishments (approximately 97.5%) had fewer than 50 employees.
- pp. 67–68, 136–142: employment projections are from EDD. Prime-age unemployment estimates use 2017–2021 Census PUMS data and exclude Del Norte County, because PUMS combines it with counties outside the region.
- p. 143: findings on transportation, childcare, cost of living, and access to training draw on 355 listening sessions conducted by the RRRISE outreach and engagement team.
- pp. 146, 149–150: projected openings are from EDD. Completions are from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart and, where applicable, Cal Poly Humboldt Institutional Research, as annual averages for academic years 2018–19 through 2022–23.
- pp. 156–160, 175–176: community SWOT findings and regional workforce barriers, including employment, childcare, and workforce participation.

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*[**Note:** Capitol Impact materials 2026a, 2026b, and 2026d–2026f are unpublished. For access to supporting data and methods, contact Capitol Impact at annie@capitolimpact.org]*

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