

Comments provided by Caryl Hart, Chair California State Parks Commission

Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife and Accountability and Administrative Review Committees
Joint Hearing on Impacts and Status of State Park Closures

11/1/11

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak today, and especially for taking up this critical issue of the impacts of State Park closures.

I am speaking today as Chair of the State Park Commission, and also on behalf of the newly formed Parks Alliance of Sonoma County, which is a group made up of representatives from State and Regional Parks as well as those nonprofits in Sonoma County who are involved in park access and preservation. We have been able to hire two staff people, including the former State Parks Superintendent for the region, Dave Gould. I believe that at least two members of the Alliance, Elisa Stancil from the Valley of the Moon Historical Society and Michele Luna of the Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods, will also be speaking here today as part of public comment.

In addition to my role as Commission Chair, I am also Director of Sonoma County Regional Parks and therefore I feel particularly qualified to speak on the impact of state park closures in my county. In Sonoma, we have been notified of the State's intention to close five of our state parks, including Annadel, Sugar Loaf Ridge, Austin Creek, Petaluma Adobe and Jack London State Parks. As you can imagine, should these closures go forward as threatened, the impact on our local economy, environment, and the health and well-being of residents will be seriously impacted. As a county that voted for Prop 21 by a significant majority, this is a real blow.

From my perspective, the state park closures will result in a budgetary hit far beyond the savings that will be gained from the proposed cuts. As those who have spoken before me have clearly laid out, the costs will be far in excess than any savings- from lawsuits, property damage within and outside of the parks, loss of outside funding sources, loss of tourism dollars, health and well-being declines, local economic impacts and deterioration of assets that the public has paid billions of dollars to preserve. Obviously the state is in a financial crisis. And this crisis impacts all aspects of state government from social welfare to criminal justice to education. We certainly appreciate that. In fact there is much to be learned from the state's response to federal requirements to reduce prison overcrowding. When pressed, new models developed. The consensus is that properly funded realignment of the criminal justice will potentially provide for a more efficient operation, while providing increasing savings for the state over time. I would propose that there is the potential for similar savings with a new approach to the operation of State Parks that includes a much stronger component and role for county level management.

Let me give some examples of what I mean, keeping in mind that there are a number of ongoing negotiations and that none of what I am describing has been decided. Let's take the case of Annadel State Park, about 5,000 acres surrounded by the city of Santa Rosa. Formerly a cattle ranch, Annadel

is treasured and heavily used by the local community. It is adjacent to a county Regional Park, which likewise adjoins a city park. The boundaries to Annadel are numerous, the park has multiple entry points- the least used of which is the State park pay lot at the end of a long road. There are several points along that road that invite free parking, with trailheads nearby and park signage. The result is that Annadel is almost fully supported by the State's general fund and produces virtually no income for State Parks. Annadel is slated for closure.

What are some of the solutions for this park? First, we have a strong Regional Parks Department and strong support for parks in this county. Second, there are a number of nonprofits anxious to help with the park operation. Third, there is the political will to keep Annadel open at the local level. Therefore, a solution to Annadel's operating losses is likely a combination of state park and Regional Park operations with non-profit support. Rather than attempting to close this park, which in addition to subjecting State Parks to lawsuits from its violation of Land and Water Fund commitments (Annadel was partially acquired with Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars), will also heavily impact county public safety resources (you will hear from our Sheriff Freitas on this in a moment), and our local economy, health of residents and the like, it makes far more sense to provide a mechanism for State Parks to determine a reduced cost and partnership to operate the park. However, the approach taken, which is tantamount to taking a sledgehammer to the foundation of the department, makes it extremely challenging for State Parks to enter into a sensible arrangement for park management. What I strongly suggest is that rather than putting our priceless state park system at risk by adopting blunt force trauma with the proposed \$22 million cut, step back and look at a new model. A multi-pronged approach at the local level which allows services to be provided by those closest to the people might well be an answer. Certainly, closure of state parks will be felt most acutely at the local level. Therefore, it makes sense to turn to the counties, or a well-defined local governmental entity to work with state parks on solutions.

Let me turn for a moment to Jack London State Park, which I know Elisa Stancil will also be discussing with you. At Jack London, in the Sonoma Valley, the Valley of the Moon Historical Society has spent countless hours and raised millions of dollars to completely restore Jack London's cottage. They manage the cottage, help pay to staff the park, and do everything within their power to keep the vision and tremendous beauty that the park brings to each visitor alive. Just last month, in one of the most inspiring evenings I have experienced, the Valley of the Moon Historical Society put on an event with the Transcendence Theater company that brought Broadway stars to perform in the old ruins of Jack London's winery. It was a sold out event—and the theater company wants to come back and make a permanent home at Jack London, bringing revenue to the park and untold joy to park visitors. Jack London State Park is on the closure list. But once again, there is an opportunity to stop this from occurring through this new integrated approach. Valley of the Moon has put in a proposal to run the park under the AB 42 framework. And this is to be admired- there is no question about it. Still, there are limitations to what the group can do. They cannot respond to crime in the park, or fire, or vandalism. All of these will require Sonoma County sheriff and fire services. They also cannot be expected to fix damage to the cottage, whether it is by a falling branch or some other unforeseen incident. After spending millions to restore this cultural treasure, so important to Californians, should

we simply abandon it and leave it to a non-profit to somehow come up with the funding to save it from decay? I would propose that it is incumbent upon us to find a better solution, and again I believe it is through a funded and appropriate realignment of resources that we can do it.

For each park set for closure in Sonoma County, and indeed I am sure throughout the state, there are similar solutions. The key, in my mind, is to provide the time and a mechanism to look at each park in the context of its geography and its existing support network. The local park superintendents need to be fully empowered to work with the counties where that makes sense, and with other governmental entities where appropriate. Funding needs to be provided to parks to begin this new realignment, with the understanding that it will be for this transition. There is no question that a new model is needed, and we are snowballing in that direction. The issue for you to consider today is whether you want to take hold of this process and do your duty as our representatives to help us preserve these amazing treasures, this system of parks which we have painstakingly built since 1864. I don't know about you, but I do not want to take part in its decline. I believe we together we can find solutions which lead to the preservation of the state parks for ourselves and for our children, and I am fully prepared to work with you, the Governor and the state parks staff on this new path.