

Assembly Member Huffman's Water Parks and Wildlife Hearing

June 10, 2011 - Spring Lake, 4:00 pm

Good afternoon and thank you Assembly Member Huffman for hosting this important hearing.

As I stand here on June 10th 2011, I still remember vividly January 10th 2008 when the first list of 48 State Parks proposed for closure was released. Ever since, our community has been outraged that their beloved State Parks could close.

For Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods it has resulted in hundreds of hours organizing and participating in various efforts both locally and in Sacramento for the past four years.

- We organized a Town Hall meeting in Guerneville with 500 attendees,
- we've supported the California State Park Foundation's PAD each year and once with a busload of 60 Sonoma County residents,
- we coordinated an impressive Sonoma County effort to gather signatures to get Prop 21 on the ballot and
- we worked very hard to get out the vote.

Stewards has been a Cooperating Association for Russian River area State Parks for over 25 years. We work to uphold the mission of State Parks through our education programs, as well as stewardship and habitat restoration projects. The 400 State Park volunteers we manage are the heart and soul of our efforts and they invest 30,000 hours a year in their parks, which equates to \$630,000 of in-kind services.

Currently, Austin Creek State Recreation Area is on the closure list and let's not forget about the drastic service reductions we are experiencing in other Russian River State Parks. There are seasonal closures of 5 campgrounds, 10 day use areas and Fort Ross has been closed weekdays. State Parks will NOT be able to reopen 10 camping and day-use areas this summer.

Austin Creek is comprised of over 5,600 acres of oak woodlands, redwood forest, and the headwaters of East Austin, Fife and Gilliam Creeks. The park includes twenty miles of hiking trails, two backcountry camp-sites and Bull Frog Pond campground with twenty-four sites. The visitation at this park is 200,000 a year. Wildflower displays are incredible and the area is prolific with a diversity of native plants and wildlife.

Austin Creek's historic **Pond Farm Pottery** was the home and school of the internationally renowned ceramic artist, Marguerite Wildenhain. This park includes a rich cultural history and prehistoric sites that date back over 4,000 years.

In recent years, the park has been threatened by small wild fires, five different marijuana growing locations and vandalism. These activities have occurred while being open. With closure, its scary to think what might happen.

Since 2009, Stewards has been raising money to keep the Visitor Center and restroom open in Jenner. This includes paying the utility bills.

We are currently working with our District staff to look at the feasibility of increasing our services in order to ensure that our parks are protected and accessible.

Stewards is successfully recruiting additional volunteers for our programs in Austin Creek. Besides docent-led interpretive hikes, our programs include a Foot Patrol, Mounted Assistance Unit for Equestrians, and we are looking for volunteers willing to ride the service roads on bicycle. Our dedicated trail volunteers provide amazing support to the maintenance staff on a monthly basis. Having eyes and ears on this park land is essential for its protection. We must do all we can to prevent a devastating wild fire, further destruction from marijuana growing and more vandalism.

Restoring services on Sonoma Coast is also a priority. We've been providing portable restrooms in closed park areas for our environmental education programs with school children. Stewards is committed to continuing services for 6,000 school children who use our State Parks as their outdoor classroom each year. The positive influence and opportunity to instill stewardship values in our youth is the most important work that we do.

I am always inspired by the outpouring of support each time we receive more bad news. It's going to take a lot of creative thinking and partnerships to keep our parks protected and hopefully to reopen them in some capacity or another. Our goal of achieving a sustainable funding source for California State Parks is more important than ever.

Recently, Stewards was awarded funding for a strategic planning and capacity building process that we will accomplish in partnership with State Parks and community stakeholders. This process will provide a roadmap for our work in the next 3-5 years.

We greatly appreciate the work of the State Parks Foundation and Jared Huffman on AB 42 and are looking forward to the opportunities it will provide for nonprofit organizations. We are thankful for the California League of Park Associations for their support and local agencies like Regional Parks, the Open Space District and local nonprofits, the Sonoma Land Trust and LandPaths for their willingness to assist those of us who have been providing opportunities for our community to invest in Sonoma County State Parks for decades.

Together, we WILL Save our State Parks!