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Oversight Hearing

June 10, 2011

4:00-6:00 p.m.

Spring Lake Regional Park
Upper Oak Knoll Picnic Area
5585 Newanga Avenue
Santa Rosa

**California State Parks: -
Impacts of Proposed State Park Closures and -
Present and Future Strategies for managing State Parks -**

BACKGROUND

California's state park system includes 279 state park units and is second only to the National Park System as the largest and most diverse park system in the country. California's state parks include over 1.6 million acres of public lands, 280 miles of coastline, 15,000 campsites, and 3,000 miles of trails. The diversity of the system is unparalleled, ranging from coastal beaches and wetlands, to redwood forests, deserts and historical monuments. The system represents the largest collection of natural, cultural and recreational resources of any state in the nation. California's state parks are managed by the Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) for the benefit of all California citizens, and are held in trust for present and future generations.

STATE PARKS BUDGET CRISIS. Unfortunately, California's state parks are in crisis. Earlier this year the Governor proposed and the Legislature approved an \$11 million reduction in General Fund support for state parks, to be followed by an additional \$11 million reduction in the following fiscal year, for a total ongoing planned budget reduction of \$22 million. The Administration has characterized this reduction as a permanent reduction, though whether the intent is to restore these funds in future years once the state's economy recovers is unclear. The \$22 million General Fund reduction also comes on top of several years of reductions in state park funding, which collectively adds up to a 37% decrease in GF support for DPR since 2007. As a result of these past funding reductions, operating hours and services have already been significantly reduced in many state parks, resulting in what might be characterized as functional closures for many state parks, even before the proposed list of 70 complete park closures was released by the Administration.

PROPOSED STATE PARK CLOSURES. The Governor on May 13, 2011 announced plans to close 70 state parks (see attached list) to accommodate the state's GF budget reductions. DPR has indicated that it will take up to July 1, 2012 to complete the closures, though some parks and facilities may be closed by September. A few examples of some of the iconic parks on the closure list and their features include:

- Jack London State Historic Park – home of the author of "The Call of the Wild."
- Annadel State Park – 5,000 acres of rolling hills with 40 miles of walking and riding trails next to a major urban center, with lakes, streams and red-legged frog habitat.
- Henry Coe State Park – 2nd largest park in the state and also near major population centers.
- Hendy Woods State Park - acquired in 1958 with 2 virgin redwood groves and Navarro River.
- Sugarloaf Ridge State Park – home to headwaters of Sonoma Creek, a 25 foot waterfall, and the Robert Ferguson Observatory offering year-round astronomy education and one of the largest telescopes dedicated to public viewing.
- Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve – on the shore of Mono Lake, protects unique geologic features not present in any other state park.
- Railtown 1897 State Historic Park – unique historic site used for the filming of over 200 Hollywood movies.
- Samuel P. Taylor State Park – beautiful redwood park through which salmon and steelhead trout migrate to spawn in Lagunitas/Papermill Creek.
- Brannan Island State Recreation Area – one of the only state parks and publicly accessible sites in the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta.
- Olompali State Historic Park – historic Miwok sites overlooking San Pablo Bay and Petaluma River.
- China Camp State Park – with estimated 50,000 visitors per year, including hundreds of children, miles of tidal salt marsh, oak woodland, hiking and biking trails, picnic and camping grounds.
- Austin Creek State Recreation Area – miles of diverse habitats with oak woodlands, rolling hills, meadows, prolific wildflower displays, riparian forests, and family and back-country camp sites.
- Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park – historic ranch of General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo.
- Tomales Bay State Park - a park since 1952, one of the only remaining virgin stands of Bishop Pine.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS. Closure of state parks could negatively impact both the state budget and local economies. According to studies by the California State University and the California State Park Foundation, for every \$1 the state spends on state parks, \$2.35 are returned to the General Fund through economic activities in local communities surrounding parks, with much of this increased revenue coming from out of state tourists. Closure of state parks will negatively impact local economies that depend on tourism and economic activity generated from state park visitation. Those communities in turn generate income and sales tax revenue for the state. A recent study by researchers at California State University Sacramento found that park users spend an average of \$57.63 per visit, resulting in over \$4.2 billion in positive economic impacts to the state and local economies.

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES. To varying degrees throughout the state, local governments, nonprofit groups, volunteers, and private concessionaires currently provide important services that assist the state in operating state parks and providing public services that might otherwise be beyond the capacity of the state to provide. Expansion of existing partnerships and development of new partnerships may be a critical tool in maintaining public access to state parks, particularly during these challenging economic times. However, the extent to which these alternatives can bridge the gap is uncertain, particularly since many local communities have also been hard hit with the economic downturn. Nevertheless, such partnerships are a strategic and valuable tool for certain state parks, especially while longer term solutions are developed. State/federal partnerships may also provide co-management opportunities that are mutually beneficial for both state and national parks.

In addition to the budget shortfall, state parks face many other challenges, including pressures from competing land uses as California's population continues to grow, and from emerging environmental threats such as those posed by climate change. Protecting and managing state parks, and maintaining these valuable public assets for future generations, will require new levels of creativity, leadership, cooperation, and shared commitment from all levels of government and citizens throughout the state.