



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

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**BIG LAGOON COUNTY PARK
 ENHANCEMENT PROJECT CONCEPTUAL PLAN**

November 10, 2010

Overview

Humboldt County Public Works Department proposes a project (likely to be implemented in phases) to improve the protection of cultural resources and enhance facilities at Big Lagoon County Park.

Background

Big Lagoon County Park is located along the Pacific Ocean coast at the southwest end of Big Lagoon. The park provides public access to the beach and lagoon and opportunities for a variety of recreational opportunities including boating, picnicking, beachcombing, camping, and wildlife viewing. Park facilities include a boat ramp, parking area, campground with 25 designated campsites, two restrooms, and a road and trail network. Natural areas within the park include spruce forest, beach and dunes, coastal prairie (meadow), and wetlands. The park is managed by the Parks Division of the Humboldt County Public Works Department.

Adjacent areas to the park include the Pacific Ocean to the west, Humboldt Lagoons State Park to the north, Big Lagoon Rancheria tribal land and the Harry R. Merlo State Recreation Area to the east, and the Big Lagoon Park Company community to the south. The Big Lagoon Park Company owns an approximately 54-acre parcel which contains 76 cabins owned individually by shareholders of the corporation.

The park and adjacent areas contain culturally sensitive resources associated with the Yurok village site known as O-púyweg (Roscoe, 1991; Tripp, 2007; Yurok Tribal Council, 2007; Eidsness, 2007; Eidsness, 2009). Historic, cultural, and archeological resources are protected by state and federal laws and regulations, including:

- Public Resources Code § 5097.993-5097.994
- Health and Safety Code § 7050.5
- Penal Code § 622 ½
- California Environmental Quality Act
- National Historic Preservation Act

- Archeological Resources Protection Act
- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

Humboldt County is participating in the Coalition to Protect Cultural Legacies at O-púyweg, a group convened in March 2009 to protect, preserve, and ensure respectful management of Yurok cultural legacies at the site. Other stakeholders include:

- Big Lagoon Park Company
- Big Lagoon Rancheria
- California Department of Parks & Recreation
- Local professional archeologists
- Trinidad Rancheria
- Yurok Tribe
- Yurok descendents with direct family ties to Big Lagoon

The park is accessed from Highway 101 via Big Lagoon Park Road, which connects to B Street (or B Road). At the southerly entrance to the park, there is a junction with B Street proceeding northerly toward the parking area and boat ramp, and A Street (or A Road) proceeding northeasterly toward the campground. B Street bisects the park's approximately 3.5-acre meadow, while A Street passes through an approximately 1.5-acre spruce wood lot. B Street and A Street each connect to Big Lagoon Park Road on the north side of the park, where Big Lagoon Park Road passes through the main parking area and runs along a portion of the bluff top at the west side of the park.

Historically, Big Lagoon Park Road was continuous along the top of the bluff and re-connected with B Street near the southern entrance to the park. However, the southerly portion of this road segment was damaged and partially destroyed by bluff erosion in the 1980s. After this road segment became impassable, the public began using the remaining northerly portion of the road at the north edge of the meadow as a parking area and beach access point. The eroded portion of the road was officially vacated from the County road system in 1987, while the remaining 340-foot-long northerly road portion remains in the County road system.

The park's meadow is vegetated with grass and managed as open space with periodic mowing. The meadow's low-lying vegetation enhances ocean views from Big Lagoon Park Company cabins to the south and southeast. Recreational use of the meadow is generally limited to walking, except for a small area at the southwest end along the top of the bluff which is used as a take-off site for paragliding.

Project Need

Cultural Resource Protection

A large portion of the remains of the Yurok village site known as O-púyweg is situated beneath the meadow area within the park. The village site includes human burials, funerary items and other artifacts, and other physical remains (midden) associated with the historical and pre-historical inhabitation of the area, and as such has significant value to Yurok descendants of Big Lagoon, the Yurok Tribe, Big Lagoon Rancheria, and others. Historically, the site suffered looting and unauthorized excavation (Platt, 2009). Disturbance decreased in the 1970s following legal protections and awareness prompted by the Northwest Indian Cemetery Protection Association and

others. However, impacts to the site have continued, both intentionally by individuals with knowledge of the site's history and significance, and inadvertently by park visitors unaware of this background.

In addition to the park meadow, other sensitive locales (middens, reported burials, traditional Yurok native plant gathering areas) are situated within the park or on neighboring properties (Roscoe, 1991; Eidsness, 2007; Eidsness, 2009). Previous cultural and archeological surveys have been focused on limited survey areas, and a comprehensive survey of the park and adjacent lands has not been completed. Much of the park and adjacent parcels are considered highly sensitive for significant cultural sites.

Unauthorized driving across the park meadow has the potential to physically impact archeological deposits. Driving off the established road is a violation of county ordinance, but has proven difficult to enforce, and violations are a regular occurrence. The most common violation is driving across the meadow from the bluff-top portion of Big Lagoon Park Road to B Street. More generally, the presence and use of the road (B Street) through the former Yurok village site is considered by the Yurok Tribe and others to be disrespectful of the burials and incompatible with protection of a sacred site.

Mowing of the park meadow has resulted in disturbance of midden. Erosion and unofficial "use" trails have exposed midden in localized areas along the bluff. Mechanical mowing along the road to the campground (to provide clear line-of-sight for public safety) has disturbed midden within the road cutbank.

Other Needs

The campground does not have sites designated for people with disabilities. Such sites need to meet certain design criteria for accessibility (California State Parks, 2009).

The park has a variety of signs for conveying administrative, public safety, regulatory, and interpretive information. These signs have accumulated over time and lack organization and cohesiveness. Several signs are not well-designed to draw the attention of park visitors, and some detract from the park's scenery. Sign re-organization should be developed with a consideration for off-hikers from the lagoon spit and beach, which is part of the California Coastal Trail, in addition to visitors who enter through the main park entrance (California Coastal Conservancy, 2010).

The invasive New Zealand Mud Snail was detected in Big Lagoon by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2008. New Zealand Mud Snail populations can grow in high densities and have the potential to significantly disrupt the food chain for native species. The mud snail competes with other invertebrates for consumption of algae, and can cause a reduction in the food resources available to native fish. The California Department of Fish & Game has requested installation of a wash station at Big Lagoon to allow boaters to rinse their boats after use within the lagoon to reduce the risk of spreading the invasive species to other water bodies.

The floating dock at the boat ramp is nearing the end of its useful life and warrants replacement.

Consultation

Drafts of the Conceptual Plan were revised based on comments received from the following Coalition participants:

- Greg Collins, Associate State Archeologist, California Department of Parks & Recreation
- Janet P. Eidsness, Registered Professional Archeologist and Heritage Resources Consultant
- Robert McConnell, Sr., Tribal Heritage Preservation Officer, Yurok Tribe
- Buffy McQuillen, Repatriations and Collections Coordinator, Yurok Tribe
- Virgil Moorehead, Tribal Chairman, Big Lagoon Rancheria
- Tony Platt, History Professor Emeritus, CSU-Sacramento
- Jackie Tidwell, Secretary, Big Lagoon Park Company
- Donald C. Tuttle, President of Board of Directors, Big Lagoon Park Company

Elements of Proposed ProjectSummary

The proposed project includes elements that would serve to modify the features and public use of the meadow area, which is the most culturally sensitive area in the park. The meadow area would no longer be accessible to vehicles, and the road passing through the meadow would be decommissioned. The meadow would continue to be managed as open space and be accessible by visitors. As a management practice, vegetation in the meadow will be allowed to grow to a greater height to help discourage people from disturbing the ground. Planting of taller herbaceous and/or shrub species is being considered. The project includes a goal of achieving no net loss of parking through more efficient use of the existing paved surface and potentially a small expansion of the main parking area. Potential project elements not related to cultural resources protection are identified in order to address other park facility needs and provide the opportunity for more comprehensive environmental review and permitting. The ultimate scope of the project will be refined based on funding opportunities, consultation with stakeholders, more detailed design and feasibility evaluations, and environmental review. Implementation is expected to occur in phases.

Project Elements:

- Road conversion for portion of Big Lagoon Park Road – The 340-foot-long portion of Big Lagoon Park Road along the top of the bluff at the west side of the park would be converted to a pedestrian trail and picnic area. The road segment would be officially vacated from the County road system in accordance with Street and Highways Code § 8320. A gate would be installed at the intersection of Big Lagoon Park Road and B Street to allow vehicle access for park maintenance staff and emergency vehicles. Picnic tables or benches would be installed at the end of the road segment.
- No Net Loss of Parking – Closure of the northerly portion of Big Lagoon Park Road at the north edge of the meadow along the top of the bluff to vehicles will eliminate approximately ten informal parking spaces. The project will have a goal of achieving no net loss of parking spaces. The first priority will be to evaluate the potential for re-striping the main parking area in order to use the existing paved surface more efficiently and increase the number of designated parking spaces. If necessary, the project will consider the feasibility of a small expansion of the main parking area.

- Road Decommissioning for portion of B Street – The approximately 500-foot-long portion of B Street currently passing through the park meadow would be decommissioned by removing the asphalt and portions of the road base and re-vegetating the area. The road segment would be officially vacated from the County road system. Barriers would be erected to prevent vehicle access to the meadow. A Street would become the main vehicle access route in and out of the park.
- New Traffic Signage – Potential effects on traffic circulation due to the decommissioning of B Street through the park meadow will be evaluated. The need for additional traffic signs, or other measures, to direct park-related vehicle traffic onto A Street rather than residential roads will be evaluated.
- Meadow Vegetation Management – The approach for managing vegetation on the park meadow is a work in progress, with the goal of preventing cultural resource impacts while also addressing issues of public access, open space, viewsheds, maintenance costs, control of weeds and tree encroachment, and avoiding potential concealment for would-be looters. County Parks has resumed mowing responsibility in areas where volunteers had previously mowed, reduced the frequency of mowing, implemented a procedure to raise the mower blades to the highest setting, and directed staff to avoid ground disturbance and be aware for evidence of midden. The overall plan for managing meadow vegetation will continue to be developed.
- Meadow Planting – Planting of taller herbaceous and/or shrub native species in portions of the meadow is being considered to discourage ground disturbance. Candidate herbaceous species include Pacific reed grass (*Calamagrostis nutkaensis*). Candidate shrub species include silk tassel (*Garrya elliptica*) and California wax myrtle (*Myrica californica*).
- Meadow Protective Covering – The option of placing a protective soil layer over portions of the meadow to reduce accessibility for looting and vandalism will be evaluated (Thorne, 1991).
- Bluff Erosion Treatment – The feasibility of bluff erosion treatment to protect cultural resources in localized areas will be evaluated.
- Use Trail Treatment – Unofficial use trails would be decommissioned through re-vegetation, placement of obstructions, or other means.
- Midden Treatment on Road to Campground – Potential treatments to stabilize and protect the midden along the road to the campground will be evaluated. Currently, as a management practice, the Public Works Department has implemented a procedure to avoid ground disturbance in this area when mowing is performed. The area has been posted with road-side paddle signs as an Environmentally Sensitive Area.
- Improved Signage – A comprehensive sign plan would be developed and implemented to improve the park's signs near the entrance and in the vicinity of the main parking area. A new interpretive sign regarding cultural resources, legal protections, and penalties would be developed in consultation with the Coalition. The project may include collaboration with

California Department of Parks & Recreation for a new kiosk that could be utilized by both county and state agencies.

- Accessible Campsites – Two new campsites would be developed in the campground to meet current accessibility standards.
- Boat Wash Station – The feasibility of a boat wash station will be evaluated.
- Dock Replacement – The floating dock will be replaced with a dock of comparable size.

Budget

A budgetary cost estimate has not been developed. Outside funding would need to be secured, as the Park Division's operation and maintenance budget has been reduced in recent years and does not have capacity to fund large-scale projects.

Permitting and Regulatory Compliance

The project would be subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which requires that public agencies identify potential adverse environmental impacts associated with a project and mitigate potentially significant impacts to the maximum extent feasible. An Initial Study would be prepared to identify the potential environmental impacts, determine whether the identified impacts are significant, and develop appropriate mitigation measures. Environmental factors that may be affected by the project include: aesthetics, cultural resources, recreation, and transportation/traffic. The expected environmental document for CEQA is a Mitigated Negative Declaration of environmental impact.

The project would need to comply with the North Coast Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program, and would require a coastal development permit from the Humboldt County Planning Commission.

If the project receives federal funds or is subject to permitting from a federal agency, then the project would need to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic Preservation Act.

References

California Coastal Conservancy. Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy. July 2010 Administrative Draft.

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