

PUBLIC ACCESS PLAN FOR EEL RIVER ESTUARY PRESERVE

The dual mission of The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC) is “*To preserve the beauty and biodiversity of the earth, and to provide programs so that children may know the wonder and joy of nature*”. TWC is California’s largest nonprofit landowner, with 12 preserves that encompass approximately 146,000 acres. Since its inception in 1995, TWC has preserved more than 1,250 square miles of land in California with private money, more than any other nonprofit organization. TWC purchases and restores landscapes, builds visitor facilities to welcome the public back to the land, and provides free outdoor education programs, exclusively with private donations. TWC funds more outdoor education programming at no cost to participants than any other provider in Southern California. TWC purchased the Connick Ranch in 2008 and proceeded to purchase the critical two-and-one-half mile strip of coastal dunes known as “the Palco property” in 2010, to form the 1200 acre Eel River Estuary Preserve (EREP) .

As with other acquisitions in its statewide system of preserves, TWC’s intention is to provide public access and capital improvements for the purpose of passive outdoor recreational opportunities, including: picnicking, hiking, wildlife viewing, nature study, photography, bicycling and kayaking. With the EREP, TWC is pleased to offer the public an additional opportunity of coastal access.

TWC strongly believes in supporting all levels of education for young people. In time, EREP will be the setting for outdoor education programs, offered free of charge to grades K-12. The property will also be made available to high school and college level class field trips, and to scientists for field research focused on the natural world.

TWC is currently planning for the development of the infrastructure necessary to support and facilitate this vision for public visitation, recreation, outdoor education, nature study and scientific research. This vision co-exists with improvements that will maintain and enhance overall drainage of this and other agricultural properties in the area, as well as provide access for restoration projects focused on anadromous fish (Coho, Chinook and Steelhead) and migratory birds (Pacific Flyway waterfowl and shore birds).

Public visitation at EREP will provide enhanced public access to the coast in accordance with the California Coastal Act of 1976. TWC’s plans for the Eel River Estuary Preserve are strongly endorsed by the Ferndale Chamber of Commerce and other organizations in the area, in part because it will offer a safe and more family-friendly alternative to nearby Centerville Beach County Park, which has no staff nor regular patrols. Centerville Beach County Park has been a portal for off-road use, and has suffered from vandalism and other activities that have resulted in significant resource damage. EREP will be patrolled by TWC staff during hours of operation, and will be open daily to the public, offering a diversity of nature-based recreational activities, all at no charge to the public.

Public hikes have been, are being and will continue to be conducted on the property. Prior to signage, we were informed by a representative of the county that we do not need a CUP or CDP to conduct staff led tours. Attached is a postcard of the summer schedule

Exhibit 3: Public Access Plan

of those hikes for 2012. Guided hikes have been the primary method for getting the public out onto the land until the property has an official public access entrance. The hikes are used to deliver our message, mission, recreational activities and management plan until we have open public access and specific educational plans (although natural resource values and natural history are delivered by way of the guided hike series).

TWC led hikes are usually general but can be themed, for example by a specific use group such as Audobon or a research group from the University, in those cases co-led by an expert (docent) who is with the group or club asking for a tour of the property.

The summer season hikes include botany, riparian, wetland, dunes and estuary components. The spring season offers the addition of a focus on wildflowers and harbor seals with their pups sunning on the southern spit of the estuary. Fall season offers migratory birding, whether waterfowl or raptor. The winter season is limited due to safety and access issues with flooding due to precipitation and subsequent high flows in the river, or high ocean tides, or a combination of both.

Partner hikes, with organizations such as CoastWalk or Sierra Club or Audobon or classes or research groups from Humboldt State University offer another form of hike activity.

Hikes have been advertised on the TWC website, and printed on post cards and offered through store fronts and motels in the Ferndale, Fortuna and Eureka area. The folks call in and confirm attendance in advance, or sign up on the day of the hike at the Ranger offices in the barn on the property at the time of the hike.

We are also sending out flyers and announcements of hike schedules with the various outdoor recreational storefronts, the tourism bureau, Eureka ListServes, local bulletin boards, local coffee shops, hotels and motels, and HSU recreation departments.

Hikes run from two (2) to five (5) hours, beginning at the Ranger station/barn parking lot and covering the preserve to the threshold into the dunes just north of the north barn. The longer hikes continue down the beach to the south shore of the Eel River at the estuary and back along the outer dike trail returning to the Ranger station/ barn.

Another component of the effort is to identify several miles of coastal trail along the beaches on the west side of the property. We have been working with CoastWalk to establish this access on their mapping.

TWC has and will continue to staff the preserve during hours of daily operation and at such times as the preserve will be open to the public. While staff-led hikes to this point have been offered to the public on weekends, we are also taking tours onto the property during the week. It is our hope in the future, subject to permitting, to open the preserve to public use daily. Staff will be present on the preserve during hours of public access. The preserve gates would be locked before and after posted public access hours.

Exhibit 3: Public Access Plan

Preserve use to the coastal trail would be limited to the access corridor to protect the integrity of public access, as well as the integrity of the agricultural operations and seasonal waterfowl hunting use.

The preserve will be closed to the public outside of the posted hours, subject to special hike or access arrangements. Such special uses, as granted, would involve TWC staff being present during the event or after-hour use.

TWC inherited an historic waterfowl hunting club with the purchase of the property. The Eel River Gun Club is the 2nd oldest gun club in the estuary and we have continued to lease an area known as the waterfowl ponds to the club. We have restricted the gun club use (shotgun only) to a specific portion of the preserve (approximately 60 acres) which has been fenced off from the pedestrian corridor. Subject to adaptive management, our intention would be to allow access to the hunt club pond areas for waterfowl and shorebird viewing after the period of the legal (DFG established) waterfowl seasons.

For the present, there are no guided hikes scheduled on hunt days. If and when we are able to open to the public, we will make a decision on whether or not to limit public access on hunt days DURING THE LEGAL HUNTING SEASON ONLY, (Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday of each week, 3rd weekend of October through the end of January, historically). We will adapt to the situation as the experience evolves.

There is, and will continue to be, an active agricultural operation on a majority of the preserve. Presently, the entirety of the prime agricultural lands is under lease to an organic dairy operation, Tim Miranda and Robert Miranda Dairy. Our experience has been that the organic dairy herd is a better complement to public access than a conventional beef herd; the difference being the deliberate enculturation of dairy animals to human contact. The organic dairy operation will be fenced off from the pedestrian/biking corridor and should not present a conflict for public access visitation nor interrupt agricultural operations.

Through time and again, with the active participation and feedback of local educational institutions, it is our intention to compose and deliver K-12 outdoor education curriculum conforming to the California Department of Education guidelines. We will also entertain and canvass Humboldt State University for cooperative educational programs or projects at the Bachelor and Masters/PhD level.

TWC is seeking implementation funding for specifically targeted projects currently in the planning stage. These projects, which will form integral facets of the infrastructure supporting and facilitating public visitation and outdoor education, include:

- **Construction of a concrete bridge over Cutoff Slough on a portion of the historic road that will form the backbone of a corridor providing public and administrative access to the northern coastal portions of EREP. In addition to the public access component, this route also provides critical maintenance access to the tide gates that drain this and adjacent agricultural properties.**

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Further, the span and design of the bridge will replace a failing culvert, widening the aperture of the slough channel, facilitating quicker drainage for the south-lying, prime agricultural lands.

- **Installation of a pre-fabricated steel bridge over a drainage canal on the access corridor, north of the Ranger Station. The route has been delineated by way of a wetlands study that will restore significant wetlands in the prism of an historic, pre-Coastal Act road, which TWC intends to retire on permitting and completion of this new access corridor.**
- **Construction of a new bridge over Russ Creek, utilizing newly constructed abutments, and existing pre-stressed concrete slabs, facilitating access to the southern coastal portions of EREP. In addition to availing itself to scientific and educational use, the improved bridge will allow safe access for equipment critical to maintaining the western drainage structures on the property. These structures and ditches are vulnerable to ocean incursion and aggradation during King tide events. TWC and adjacent landowners are signatories to a drainage easement to keep this western drainage functioning.**
- **Construction of parking spaces, grading and road base application; and creating of a trailhead at the Ranger station/ barn.**
- **Fencing of new public access corridor to include pedestrian and mountain biking user opportunities and the creation of a dunes and coastal trail.**
- **Construction of a kayak put-in just south of the proposed concrete bridge over Cutoff Slough.**
- **Preserve and interpretive signage from entrance through the property.**
- **Wetland delineations and soil testing for engineering at each bridge site.**
- **Construction of an ADA compliant vault toilet restroom building adjacent to the Ranger Station and of a second ADA compliant vault toilet restroom building near the North Barn, to provide the public access to sanitation facilities at the entry and northern coastal portions of the Preserve.**