

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 05, 2020

MATTOLE BEACH CAMPGROUND EXPANSION

Project No. 20-003-01
Project Manager: Triana Anderson

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$94,700 to the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), to improve and expand the Mattole Beach Campground, increasing access to low cost accommodations along the California coast.

LOCATION: Petrolia, Humboldt County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Lower Cost Coastal Accommodations

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Site-Specific Maps](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [New Interpretive Panel](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Site Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)
-

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31411-31414 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed ninety-four thousand seven hundred dollars (\$94,700) to the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (“the grantee”) to improve and expand the Mattole Beach Campground for the purpose of increasing access to low cost coastal accommodations in California.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.

2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 10 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Lower Cost Coastal Accommodations.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.”
-

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to ninety-four thousand seven hundred dollars (\$94,700) to the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to improve and expand the Mattole Beach Campground, increasing access to low cost accommodations along the California coast in Humboldt County (see Exhibit 1: Project Location Maps).

The Mattole Beach Campground offers families an economical choice for beautiful coastal accommodations charging only \$8.00 per night and providing free parking for day-use access and extended overnight trips. The campground is the starting point for many who come to hike the King Range Wilderness and the Lost Coast Trail, and backcountry permits for the area cost only \$6.00 covering five people for up to 14 days of use. The beach campground sites are in high demand between Memorial Day and Labor Day, and on spring break weeks in March and April, during which time both the campground and the parking areas are filled to capacity. Unfortunately, in the popular high season, visitors often follow the long, winding road through the mountains to the mouth of the Mattole River only to find a lack of available camping and/or parking on arrival. This situation tempts visitors to break the BLM camping stipulations by staying on the beach outside of campsite boundaries without a permit, sleeping in their cars, and parking in unsafe areas down Lighthouse Road. Expanding opportunities to park and camp in designated sites will allow more people to experience this coastal camping opportunity and reduce impacts to surrounding sensitive dune habitat, which includes populations of the Federally-listed endangered beach layia (*Layia carnosa*).

The project includes three components. The first component will reconfigure campsites within the current campground footprint, increasing the capacity for overnight coastal camping by adding eight additional campsites to the existing fifteen sites. Natural structures on site, such

as boulders, native vegetation and driftwood will be rearranged to delineate campsite boundaries, provide natural visual screens and direct visitors to new beach access trails. Heavy equipment such as a front-end loader, backhoe, and dump truck will be operated by a BLM staff to move materials and grade the road and campsites. All campsite surfaces will be graded and infrastructure will be updated with new picnic tables, fire rings, tent pad areas, and identifying signage. Signage for four beach access trails will be constructed in order to discourage walking through sensitive plant habitat or through other visitors' campsites while on the way to the coastline.

The 23 campsites will include two equestrian sites equipped with high-line posts allowing space for horses and extended parking space to provide easy access for truck and horse trailers. Twelve sites will feature a parking space at least 27' long to accommodate parking for camping trailers and RV's. The remaining sites will be used for tent camping, 6 of which are planned to be walk-in tenting sites and 2 that will provide ADA accessible infrastructure. New signage will be installed, including an informational kiosk, numbered campsite signs, and parking signs, and the existing fee tube will be relocated and updated (see Exhibit 2: Site Specific Maps). The two vaulted toilets that currently service the campground will remain and are considered sufficient to handle the increased use.

The BLM's King Range National Conservation Area (KRNCA) will collaborate with the Lost Coast Interpretive Association (LCIA), a supporting nonprofit organization, in the placement design and planting of native plants at the campground. The native plants will be used for natural screening between campsites, to separate/designate specific areas and access trails, and for beautification and restoration purposes. The plants will be purchased from both Mattole Restoration Council (MRC) and LCIA nurseries who grow locally sourced plants from seed.

The second component of the project will expand coastal access by creating additional parking to accommodate extended overnight use by backpackers utilizing the Lost Coast Trail and for day use of the Mattole Beach. The existing parking area will be expanded to create ten new pull-in spaces. Approximately 75% of the existing shrubs will be removed directly below the current parking spaces and the remaining shrubs will be combined with large boulders and driftwood logs, providing a natural boundary between upper and lower lots. In addition, an over-flow parking area will be created along the north end of Lighthouse Road, just prior to the campground sign and entrance where 200 feet of vegetation will be cleared, and the area graded and graveled for 6-8 parallel overflow parking spaces.

The third component of the project includes campground promotion, natural resource interpretation and environmental stewardship. Interpretive signage developed by the BLM will be installed at the Mattole Beach Campground in Spring of 2020. This new interpretive display will provide information at the campground kiosk and around the campground including: a detailed map displaying trails to utilize for day hikes, coastal safety concerns, and

natural and cultural resources. These displays will supplement the new interpretive sign already created and funded by the BLM(see Exhibit 3: New Interpretive Panel). To support the project goals the BLM will also create, disseminate, and fund a Mattole Beach Campground informational brochure describing the low-cost, coastal camping and recreation opportunities available for local populations. Conservancy funds will not be used for the brochure. The brochure will be distributed to Humboldt County residents out of BLM's Arcata Field Office, KRNCA Project Office, local Chambers of Commerce, visitor centers, County of Humboldt, and others.

Site Description: The Mattole Beach Campground is located in Southern Humboldt County and occupies approximately seven acres of BLM land, south of the confluence of the Mattole River and the Pacific Ocean. Located at the end of Lighthouse Road in Petrolia, the campground sits on the northwest corner of the Bureau of Land Management's King Range National Conservation Area (KRNCA) and King Range Wilderness (see Exhibit 4: Site Photos).

The campground presents a unique opportunity for affordable overnight beach camping about 600 feet from the shoreline in a secluded site sheltered by north-south stretching sand dunes. The current site provides 15 campsites, a small parking lot with a kiosk and fee tube, and two vaulted toilets.

The Mattole Beach Campground parking lot acts as a staging area for backcountry hikers setting out to trek on the Lost Coast Trail which offers 24 miles of coastal wilderness, the largest stretch in the lower 48 states. Beach access trails radiate from the campground for scenic day-hikes along the coast to explore coastal flora and fauna. A short walk from the campground will take visitors to the mouth of the Mattole River, where they have a beautiful view of the estuary and ample opportunities for bird watching. Day hikers also head to the historic Punta Gorda Lighthouse to view the resident elephant seal colony, and equestrians ride on the beach and up along the Spanish Ridge trail.

Grantee Qualifications: The BLM is a federal agency with a large presence in Humboldt County, owning and managing many large natural resources and public recreation properties. The Conservancy has worked directly with BLM on several successful public access projects, including public access and coastal trail improvements at the Ma-le'l Dunes and the Lost Coast Headlands. The BLM is uniquely qualified to undertake this project as the agency with jurisdiction over the Mattole Beach Campground, and a history of successfully completing similar projects on their land.

Project History: The Mattole Beach Campground has occupied approximately 7 acres south of the mouth of the Mattole River and estuary for 40+ years. In 2001-2002, the BLM completed a campground improvement project in order to meet the then-current public demand. A potable water system and double vault toilets were installed, and associated drainage and grading

improvements were developed. The project established a campground loop road around which individual campsites were built and clear boundaries were laid between them using natural screens such as boulders, driftwood, and native vegetation. A parking lot for day and backcountry use was constructed. All campground road surfaces were realigned, graded, and compacted. A visitor fee kiosk was installed, and the BLM began collecting \$8 per night, per campsite, while day use and parking for backcountry use remained free of charge. However, since the 2001-2002 campground improvement project, visitor use has tripled. Over the past decade, the increasing population in California has been matched with a steadily increasing demand for recreation opportunities, the result of which is reflected in visitor use data for the campground. Holding steady through the 2000's at about 2,000 campground visits per year, visitor use increased dramatically in 2010 to 2,735 visits, and again in 2016 and 2017 to 3,597 and 3,792 visits, respectively. In fiscal year 2019, analysis of Recreation Use Permits from the Mattole Beach Campground and self-reported trailhead departures and arrivals from the existing, self-serve, wilderness permit system, showed that 10,928 people used the facilities of the remote Mattole Beach Campground. The campground is particularly popular because it is the northern trailhead site for the Lost Coast Trail. In addition, the campground is one of the few locations in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties where visitors can camp on the beach. Currently, the high number of visitations vastly exceed the design and operational capacities of the site while maintenance needs increase, and the campground continues to age in a corrosive marine environment. The Mattole Beach Campground Expansion project will improve management of the current visitor demand of the campground and provide additional opportunities for low cost coastal recreation while updating campground facilities.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$94,700
Bureau of Land Management (budgeted)	\$80,870
Project Total	\$175,570

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2019/20 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection and Outdoor Access For All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68, Public Resources Code Section 80000 et seq.) . Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 (Section 80120-80121) allocates funds to the Conservancy to enhance and protect coastal and ocean resources, and, in particular, to grant funds to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for lower cost coastal accommodations (Public Resources Code Section 20120(b)). Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project includes the development of 8 new campsites at a coastal campground, and would be carried out in accordance with Chapter 10 of Division 21 regarding lower cost coastal accommodations (see "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section below).

BLM will supply the remaining funds for the project from its Operation and Maintenance funds, and has prepared the project design and site plans, interpretive signage, and other campsite signs with its own resources.

The project will also be supported by in-kind services provided by Nick's Interns and the California Conservation Corps (CCC). The Nick's Interns program employs 12 local high schoolers each summer during six weeks of environmental service projects in the KRNCA. The program is a partnership with local non-profits and funded partially by an assistance agreement between the BLM and the Mattole Restoration Council (MRC). Nick's Interns and a CCC crew will participate in site preparation and construction. The value of these services is estimated to be \$6,000.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 10 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31411-31414.

Pursuant to PRC Section 31412(a), the Conservancy may award grants and undertake projects as part of its Lower Cost Coastal Accommodations Program (Explore the Coast Overnight) to facilitate improvement of existing, and the development of new, lower cost accommodations within one and one half miles of the coast. The proposed project will improve the 15 existing campsites and provide 8 new lower cost accommodations on the shoreline.

Consistent with Section 31412(b) the campground will be affordable and available to low- and middle-income families. The objective of the Mattole Beach Campground Expansion project is to increase opportunities for low-cost coastal access and recreation in the King Range National Conservation Area (KRNCA) by increasing the capacities of the campground and parking areas to accommodate overnight camping, beach access, day use, and staging/extended parking area for backpacking on the Lost Coast Trail. In order to monitor this objective, the BLM will continue to collect visitor information on fee envelopes to track populations using the campground, types of recreational use and where visitors originated from. Rangers and staff will collect visitor use information using patrol logs and direct visitor contact. BLM staff will also speak with local community members on site to determine the effectiveness of the project. Total numbers of campers will be compared to prior years to determine on-going needs for recreational facilities. BLM staff will also monitor on-site post-construction to determine the effectiveness of the project.

The fee program at the Mattole Beach Campground is prescribed by the Bureau of Land Management and the fee rate is set federally under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) and the Federal Lands Policy Management Act (FLPMA). The *BLM Recreation Permit and Fee Administration Handbook*, drafted in accordance with these laws, states that: "The intent of the BLM Recreation Fee Program is not to maximize revenue but to help protect natural resources, provide for public health and safety, and facilitate access to public lands and related waters. Fees should be balanced and affordable for all members of the public, rather than an impediment."

In addition to the low cost of BLM campsites, the Department of the Interior offers several

programs to offset overnight fees at campgrounds including:

- 1) *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass - **Annual Pass - Cost \$80***
- 2) *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass - **Senior Pass - Cost \$10***
- 3) *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass - **Access Pass – Free for citizens with disabilities***
- 4) *America the Beautiful - National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass - **Volunteer Pass – Free after 250 hours of volunteer service.***

Under these guidelines, the campground is affordable for a wide variety of users and should continue to be an affordable option given that any increase in fee would have to be consistent with federal land management policy.

Consistent with Section 31412(c)(1), the proposed project was selected through a collaborative effort with the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission.

Pursuant to Section 31412(a), the Conservancy's implementation of the Explore the Coast Overnight Program must be guided by a lower cost accommodations assessment. The Conservancy completed the "Explore the Coast Overnight - An Assessment of Lower-Coast Coastal Accommodations" (Assessment) on March 14, 2019. The proposed project was identified as a "High Opportunity Project".

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective A** the project will provide coastal camping access for people with disabilities to and along the coast and coastal trails by installing two ADA compliant campsites that contain enlarged parking and modified infrastructure.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective D** the project improves 1 camping facility and 1 parking facility to enhance coastal recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective E** the project creates 8 units (rooms/campsites) of lower-cost coastal accommodations.

Consistent with **Goal 4, Objective B**, the project includes installation of an interpretive sign that includes information about the cultural and natural history of the area, as well as hiking and safety information.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

Explore the Coast Overnight Assessment (2019): Consistent with the goals of the Explore the Coast Overnight Assessment, the proposed project will help improve existing lower cost coastal accommodations within one and one half miles of the California coast by renovating fifteen existing campsites and creating an additional eight sites. More specifically, the project is consistent with the following goals of the Assessment:

Consistent with goal 2, the proposed project will ensure the renovated accommodations will be affordable and available for all Californians using federally set fee schedules (see "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation").

Consistent with goal 5 to preserve a variety of lower cost coastal accommodations that will serve the great diversity of California residents and enhance the public's experience when visiting the coast, the proposed project will improve and expand the Mattole Beach Campground and double the size of the parking available at the site. Visitors will have access to ADA accessible sites, to equestrian sites, sites equipped for camping trailers and RVs, tent sites, and parking for backcountry camping experiences.

4. **Support of the public:** As described in the project history section, this site has seen steadily increasing use over the last decade. This project has the support of those visitors who would like to continue to use this campground and recognize that the small size of the campground will limit their opportunities to recreate here. Additionally, the project has support from the Humboldt County Supervisor Rex Bohn (see Exhibit 5: Project Letters)
5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Humboldt County.
6. **Need:** Without Conservancy assistance, BLM will be unable to move forward with the campground expansion in the foreseeable future. The BLM would maintain the campground to the best of its ability within its existing maintenance budget, but no new campsites would be available, and further degradation caused by unpermitted camping and parking in the adjacent sensitive habitat would be expected.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The campground is particularly popular because it is the trailhead site for the Lost Coast Trail, offering one of the few coastal wilderness overnight

hiking/backpacking experiences in the U.S. In addition, the campground is one of the few locations in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties where visitors can camp on the beach. Use data indicates that while many visitors are from California and tend to live within 3-4 hours of the KRNCA, visitors have come from all over the world to experience the Lost Coast and the Mattole Beach Campground.

8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Given its location on the leeward side of the coast dunes, the campground site is moderately vulnerable to sea level rise impacts over the next several decades. How the area will respond to rising sea levels is speculative. A typical response for coastal dunes and rising sea levels is the process of retrograding dune systems, where the dunes increase in elevation and retreat inland, continuing to function as a barrier dune system. The large sediment supply available from the adjacent Mattole River and highly erosive coastline would serve as an abundant sediment supply for accommodating these dune adjustments. However, the process is exceedingly complex and likely involves periods of destabilization followed by periods of stability. Under current conditions, wash-over events do not occur at the campground. Adding to the factors in play at the site, a large earthquake sequence in 1991 uplifted this piece of coastline approximately 0.5 to 1 meter, providing some mitigation to rising sea levels. Overall, the uplifting coastline, abundant sediment supply and lack of current flooding suggest there is some resiliency to the existing site in the near-term. Over the longer term, e.g. 30-40 years, most of the campground facilities would have reached the end of their useful life in the harsh marine environment. Fortunately, the campground lacks established permanent structures. The only relatively permanent structure is the bathroom facility and it is located much higher than the campsites, affording it more protection from the rising sea levels. Overall, at the Mattole site, the gradual degradation of the facilities (e.g. picnic tables, fire pits) is expected to outpace the rate of sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** There is immediate need for implementing this project because the site is currently in high demand and overuse of the area will result in degradation of the surrounding habitat and potentially unsafe conditions for users of the site who are not acting in accordance with BLM regulations.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project provides an increase in lower cost coastal accommodations for Californians, improved coastal access facilities and increased recreational, educational and interpretive opportunities. At the same time, through thoughtful design and management of public access, the project will improve natural resource protection at the site.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee has obtained the necessary permits and completed the design and engineering for the project and will be ready to implement the project when funding is available.

13. **Cooperation:** The grantee will carry out the proposed project in close cooperation with KRNCA.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The Mattole Beach Campground is situated on the inner east side of the sand dunes and on the west side of the vegetation that surrounded the Mattole River estuary. If a wildfire traveled to the coast, visitors would be able to escape flames by walking out onto the beach and dune area. Bathrooms, storage building, kiosks and some low infrastructure would be lost, however, the campground is made up of mostly natural features such as large boulders and driftwood.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The construction phase will seek to conserve resources in order to reduce greenhouse gas outputs from vehicles used in construction.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is categorically exempt under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures) because it involves installation of small new equipment, such as new picnic tables, fire rings, sign posts, trail markers and signage and the conversion of existing small structures, that is, campground layout using driftwood, on-site boulders, and native plants, where only minor modifications were made in the exterior of the structure. In this case, the Mattole Beach Campground is being internally reconfigured, but the footprint of the campground will remain the same.

The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land) because it consists of minor public alterations in the condition of land which do not involve the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. The project will include the removal of some shrubs and small bushes to create space for campsites and for additional parking but will not involve the removal of any mature trees, nor any grading on land with a slope of greater than 10%.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption following approval of the project.