

## Park Unit Trail System Planning

### **California State Parks Trails Policy (Statement Excerpt)**

*It is the policy of the Department of Parks and Recreation to provide trails for accessing park features and facilities and to provide planning that will effectively meet near-term and long-term recreation opportunities. The Department, through a public planning process, will strive to meet the recreational, educational and interpretation needs of its diverse trail users by developing trails within state parks, consistent with park unit classification, general plan directives, cultural and natural resource protection, public safety, accessibility, user compatibility and other legal and policy mandates. Multi-use trails will be given preferential consideration in implementing this policy.*

### **Introduction**

Recreation is a key component of the Department of Parks and Recreation's mission, and trails serve as a primary facility for meeting the recreational needs of the public. The Department is therefore committed to providing the highest quality trail use opportunities for the largest number of visitors.

The Department's *Trails Policy* requires that a formal trails planning process be completed prior to implementing changes in existing trail uses, in their designs or realignments, or for new trail construction and existing trail elimination. Planning guidelines will be incorporated into the Department's *Trails Handbook*. This document will serve as the trails planning guideline until the *Trails Handbooks* is revised.

Where timely development of an overall unit trail system plan is not possible, existing trails will be evaluated singly as staff time and funding are available for management determination of their potential for enhanced-use status. Any such planning process regarding use changes for single or multiple trails within a park unit will require public participation.

As with all such far-ranging and funding-dependent Department policies, an indeterminate time period is required that allows for a seamless transition of existing trail facilities management and operation from the previous policy to the new; however, all new trail development and major trail reconstruction or realignments shall include multi-use as a primary consideration during their planning.

## **Policy and Planning Guidance**

The overall Trails Policy is composed of three parts:

- The Departmental Notice identified as the “Trails Policy”
- An interim Park Unit Trail System Planning process template
- The Trails Handbook, which identifies the departmental guidelines for trail design, construction and maintenance.

Ultimately, the *Trails Handbook* will be revised to incorporate the Park Unit Trail System Planning process and document template component. It will also include the most recent legal changes, such as Trail Accessibility requirements, and incorporate the most recent “best management practices” for trail programs within State Parks.

## **Park Unit Trail System Planning Template**

### **The Planning Process**

Trails provide the primary avenue for park visitors to interact with key park features and gain access to and appreciation for most park features and facilities. Properly sited, designed, constructed, maintained and managed trails provide quality recreation while also providing protection for sensitive natural and cultural resources by focusing recreational activity impacts to less sensitive park lands.

Historically, within state parks, trails and unpaved roads that have become the park’s trail system often existed when the property was initially acquired. They were constructed to meet the needs of the original property owners, and seldom adequately serve the needs of the park unit or meet trail guidelines as identified in the *Trails Handbook*. Prior to the department’s formalized trails training program, trails added during the early years of many state park units too often were improperly sited, poorly designed and constructed. Adequate maintenance or excessively expensive maintenance has very often been an issue. Additionally, they may unnecessarily restrict accessibility, they may not meet the recreational needs of park users, and they could be promoting damage to the park’s natural or cultural resources.

Developing a comprehensive Park Unit Trail System Plan is key to ensuring that recreational trail opportunities are made available at their fullest potential, while providing adequate and often enhanced protection for cultural and natural resources. Reaching the decision to build a new trail, implementing significant modifications to an existing trail, or revising the allowed uses on an existing trail requires both staff specialist review and public input. While a new trail, a major trail modification, or a change in designated trail use can be implemented on a single trail basis, park-wide and regional trail system planning remains the preferred and the most effective avenue for identifying and establishing interrelated recreational trail corridors, thus mitigating resource impacts and reducing construction and maintenance costs. Employing the

most comprehensive planning process appropriate and affordable, will facilitate the timely and affordable completion of future trail projects, while significantly reducing the potential for legitimate public criticism and project delays.

### **Needs Identification**

Park General Plans will identify the need for a unit trails plan. In the absence of an approved General Plan, development of an adequate stand-alone Unit Trails System Plan can require several levels specialists' input and public participation in order to be reasonably assured that it will not conflict with a future Park General Plan.

The Park Unit Trails System Plan process is ideally begun as a proactive management decision designed to enhance recreational opportunities while ensuring quality resource management practices within a park unit. Park general plans also identify the need for unit trail system plans, or alternately the process can begin as a management response to public actions or requests. Typically, District staff develops a brief written synopsis of the need or problem and forwards it to the District Superintendent. A Project Evaluation Form or its equivalent can serve as the written format, based on:

- Response to the need as identified in an approved park General Plan
- Recognition that additional recreation opportunities might be needed and are potentially available
- Public requests for new trail construction, trail rerouting, or changes in designated trail uses
- Regional trail planning or development efforts that may impact state park property or trails
- Recognition of resource related damage from current officially recognized trails or from illegal trails or illegal trail use

If the District Superintendent concurs with staff or public requests that a Unit Trails System Plan is needed to support potential changes in a park unit's existing trail status, he/she may direct that additional necessary data needs be identified and information gathered that will support or refute the initial staff/public recommendation. The District Superintendent may also direct staff to begin the development of a Unit Trail System Plan.

Following review of staff recommendations and their supporting documentation, the District Superintendent should issue a written decision whether to proceed or not to proceed with a Unit Trails System Plan or with another trail related action, such as a change in trail use designation. A Superintendent may make a do-not-proceed decision, but should create a written record that would include the alternatives considered, clearly identified facts upon which the decision is based, and a recommended sequence of subsequent actions, if any.

The decision to proceed or not to proceed with developing a Unit Trail System Plan or other trail related action, can be based on a number of factors including the assessment of recreational needs, potential impacts to other users, park and regional resources, and the fiscal, administrative, and maintenance capabilities of the Unit/District.

If the Superintendent's decision is to proceed with the Unit Trail System Plan or other trail related action, such as a change in designated users, the following process, as appropriate to the individual park unit, should be used as a guideline:

### **The Unit Trail System Planning Process**

#### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

Data, as appropriate to the individual park unit, are gathered and an analysis is prepared. These should include:

- 1) Identify users, including current users and potential new users. Include the types of current uses, levels of use, numbers of user days by types, levels and types of illegal trail use, seasonal changes in use, etc. Surveys can include data from onsite trail user counts, electronic trail counters, in-person surveys, etc.
- 2) Subsequent to any planning process, data, constraints, recommendations and prohibitions identified in existing land base obligations should be identified. They may include:
  - Unit classification requirements or use restrictions
  - Guidelines from existing general plans, unit trail plans, management plans
  - Review of collaboration with local, regional and state trail plans
  - Identification of sensitive natural resources
  - Identification of sensitive cultural resources
  - Existing restrictions of deeds, covenants, etc.
  - Topographic limitations
  - Land capabilities
  - Water quality

#### **Public participation in the planning and decision-making process**

Using methods appropriate to the situation, public participation must be an integral part of the process of identifying planning issues and developing alternatives and final decisions on a Unit Trail System Plan or on a change in trail use proposal.

#### **Issues/Scope Identification**

The first step of issue identification can be accomplished effectively through visitor surveys. They can provide a guiding list of issues, which can be expanded upon at public workshops and ultimately form the scope of an overall Unit Trails System Plan. Participants can include those from the following non-inclusive list:

- Trail users
- Your own agency/park personnel
- Adjacent and in-holding property owners
- Public land agencies
- Public safety and emergency services
- Non-profit land owners/managers
- Private property owners
- Past property owners
- Concessionaires
- Local community organizations or representatives
- Control agencies
- County agencies
- Other stakeholders

Data from the surveys, interviews and workshops should be combined with staff specialist recommendations and used to begin identifying the scope of the initial Unit Trail System Plan or of the proposed change-in-use designation.

The District Superintendent shall forward his/her recommendation(s) on the Draft Unit Trail System Plan to the appropriate Field Division Chief and to the Statewide Trails Office and the Recreation Unit for review.

NOTE: When the planning process is undertaken for only a single trail within a park, and not as a full Unit Trail System Plan, the Headquarters-level plan review is not required, but may be incorporated as determined by the District Superintendent.

### **Unit Trail System Plan Content**

Differences in park units and their related trail systems preclude the use of a singular format for a final Unit Trail System Plan. The following “typical” Table of Contents provides an initial guideline for identifying subject considerations for individual trail action determinations, as well as potential sections to be included in a Unit Trail System Plan.

#### **I. Introduction**

A brief overview of the project and its benefits to the park and to park users

#### **II. Background**

Review of the actions, impacts or related efforts that led to the project/plan

#### **III. Project setting and history**

A detailed account of the park/trail setting, their histories, project supporters

**IV. Overview of the park unit**

History of the park unit, prior to and following inclusion in the state park system, including a brief summary of the park's recreation profile and a brief summary of park features, attributes, flora, fauna, cultural resources

**V. Details of the planning process, its policy context and relationship to the Unit General Plan**

Identify those involved (by name and professional/public relationship), both the supporters and those opposed (and their issues) to the final plan or portions of the final plan. Is the plan supportive of the department's trails policy of multi-use preference for trail use designation, or are there extenuating circumstances preventing such action.

**VI. Summary of Alternative Plans and the Preferred Final Plan**

Taken from the project scope, identify which trail plan alternatives were considered, which were rejected and what were the reasons for their rejection. Include a summary of the selected plan and identify the reasons for its selection.

**VII. Preferred Final Plan Elements**

**A. Inventories**

- Existing recreational trail resources including trails, roads used as trails and the types of uses allowed on each. Include existing levels of illegal trails uses (may be included with Section D: Unit Trails and Roads: GIS)
- Regional trail and road linkages
- Public transit connections
- Existing trail user groups
- ADA considerations and accommodations
- Neighboring communities (identify business/commercial and residential areas that could impact the park and its trails)
- Neighboring recreational trail resources (for example, are there trails specifically for equestrians or mountain bikes nearby, or other multi-use trails)
- Natural resource attributes
- Cultural resource attributes
- Planning zones (if designated in general plan)

**B. Trail Use Surveys**

- Opportunities for enhanced recreational activities
- Public demand for recreation access/use
- Potential future recreational user groups
- Projections of unmet park and local recreational trail needs

- Opportunities for enhanced public transit connections
- Opportunities for linkages of regional trails for recreation and commuting

C. Potential Recreational Trail Opportunities

- Access to natural and cultural resource features
- Opportunities for enhancing social relationships among users
- Participation in regional planning
- New or enhanced public recreational trail access/use opportunities

D. Unit Trails and Roads (GIS Map Overlays with Descriptions)

Identify all EXISTING:

- Trails, their designated uses and surface types (include UTAP data if available)
- Accessible Trails and levels of accessibility (surface types, grades, etc.)
- Needed trail realignments
- Trail removals and related land restoration
- Major trail realignments (new corridors) and their surface types and designated uses
- New trails (corridors), their surface types and designated uses
- New Accessible Trails and levels of accessibility (as separately identified trails or trail segments)
- Road to trail conversions, existing and future needs
- Public roads and pedestrian walkways/sidewalks (Outdoor Recreation Access Routes), including campground and day-use loops (include surface/tread types)
- Service, fire and other “official use only” paved and non-paved roads (include surface types)
- Needed addition of public roads
- Needed removals and realignments of public roads
- Needed additions of service, fire and other paved and non-paved roads
- Needed removals and realignments of service, fire and other paved and non-paved roads

E. Trail System Program Management

Identify the key elements and actions for a Trail System Management program that could include:

1. Establishing a Trail Monitoring Program for
  - User (and potential user) satisfaction
  - User counts by types of uses

- Visitor incidents, conflicts, accidents
- Periodic and enhanced maintenance needs identification
- Public safety and information/education needs
- Resource impacts, including invasive exotics, soil loss, water quality, vegetation loss, etc.
- Resource/habitat improvements resulting from focused/managed trail use
- Potential for weather-related or other temporary trail closures
- Adjacent private or public property owner impacts

2. Creation and management of a Trail Volunteer Program for

- Inclusion of public participation and support
- Safety education
- Trail construction and maintenance
- Trail patrols

3. Priority Actions

Develop a list of priority actions regarding trail maintenance, new trail construction, existing trail realignment and road/trail removal. (While an implementation timeline will be dependent upon many factors, such as funding availability, setting priorities within a park unit will facilitate allocation of limited resources and can help place focus to funding and grant raising efforts.)

F. Environmental Review

Include appropriate EIR review and findings as appropriate for this level of tiered planning. It is expected that additional CEQA review/compliance will be required for development of specific trail projects.