



Executive Summary

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DESCRIPTION OF SONOMA COAST STATE BEACH

Since its incorporation into the California Department of Parks and Recreation's (the Department's) State Parks system in 1934 and its classification as a state beach in 1964, Sonoma Coast State Beach (SB) has become one of the most visited state parks in California. It is known for its rugged coastline, sandy coves, sweeping ocean vistas, and a variety of other natural, cultural, and recreational resources. Sonoma Coast SB stretches for 19 miles along the Sonoma County coastline from Bodega Head at the southern end to beyond the Vista Point, located 4 miles north of the coastal community of Jenner. It also extends inland, encompassing portions of the lower watershed of the Russian River.

PURPOSE FOR GENERAL PLAN

Despite the heavy and increasing visitation experienced by Sonoma Coast SB, no new major recreational facilities have been developed at Sonoma Coast SB for the past 20 years. At the same time, unique and important natural and cultural resources that warrant additional levels of protection and restoration have been identified at Sonoma Coast SB. Since the adoption of the Interim Management Plan in 1984, several new properties have been added to Sonoma Coast SB and additional acquisitions are being considered. Recognition of these and other issues prompted the preparation of this Preliminary General Plan (the Plan) and Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR), which provides a long-term management approach and a planning framework with which the various management challenges facing Sonoma Coast SB today would be addressed.

APPROACH TO THE PRELIMINARY GENERAL PLAN

The Plan reflects the Department's dual mandates as the stewards of sensitive resources and the providers of recreational opportunities. The protection and restoration of natural and cultural resources are key components of the Plan. The Plan includes goals and guidelines aimed at biological resources and water quality protection, the preservation of scenic and cultural resources, recreation and interpretive opportunities, and facility improvements and potential construction of new developments in response to heavy and growing visitation, environmental constraints, and recent and expected near-term property acquisitions.

The Plan considers the appropriate carrying capacity of Sonoma Coast SB with regard to resource protection and the desired high-quality visitor experiences. It emphasizes the importance of long-term sustainability, the use of environmental indicators, and adaptive management practices. It is acknowledged that achieving the stated vision of the Plan would be realized incrementally, as funding becomes available, and would be completed over time through daily operational actions taken by Department staff.

PLANNING PROCESS

A thorough analysis of existing conditions and concerns was the first step undertaken during the planning process. A set of key planning issues was obtained through consultation with the public, interested organizations, and local, State, and federal agencies, via a survey, a public meeting, and a notice letter. The identified issues include appropriateness of various recreational activities, protection of sea mammals and other wildlife species, preservation of important archaeological resources, inadequacy of day-use and overnight recreational facilities, water quality improvement, and grazing management. At the same time, information regarding the physical characteristics of Sonoma Coast SB was collected and analyzed, including the compilation of a geographic information system (GIS) database of the natural and cultural resources present at Sonoma Coast SB with use of existing data and field survey results. The resulting data was used to help make informed decisions regarding environmental constraints to development.¹

The second step, which began with consideration of the broadest planning objective (e.g., Mission of the Department and Unit Classification), consisted of vision definition and implementation for Sonoma Coast SB. A vision was developed, and the existing declaration of purpose was revised, to reflect the updated knowledge of the resources at Sonoma Coast SB and the understood significance and value of Sonoma Coast SB with respect to recreation and educational opportunities for the region and for the State. Planning concepts, such as goals and guidelines, management zones, potential development areas, and management plans, were developed to achieve the vision. Public input regarding the vision and the planning concepts was obtained through a survey and a public meeting and incorporated into the Plan.

The third major step in the planning process consisted of the environmental analysis and the consideration of alternatives. The Plan includes an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that identifies the potential environmental effects of the General Plan, consistent with requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The Plan establishes resource-specific management guidelines in order to become a “self-mitigating” plan, designed to avoid, reduce, or minimize environmental impacts of proposed facilities to a less-than-significant level. Based on the environmental analyses, alternatives were developed and considered for the purpose of minimizing impacts to the extent feasible. The opportunity for public review of this Preliminary General Plan/Draft EIR is also provided during the CEQA process. The CEQA environmental review process and the opportunity provided for written comment are described in Section 4.1 of this document.

SUMMARY AND STRUCTURE OF THE PLAN

The Plan is comprised of four main sections: (1) introduction; (2) existing conditions and issues analysis; (3) the “Plan” component (e.g., goals and guidelines); and the (4) environmental impact report (EIR). Chapter 2 of the Plan includes information on existing

¹ The GIS database developed for this General Plan is available and recommended for continued District use.

conditions, as well as issues identified through public and agency scoping efforts, as described above.

Some of the goals and guidelines comprising the Plan require the preparation of specific management plans and other investigations or programs subsequent to the adoption of the Plan, including the following:

- ▶ develop a Park-wide Cultural Resource Management Plan,
- ▶ participate in regional conservation plans (NAT-1H),
- ▶ establish monitoring program (NAT-1A, NAT-1J, NAT-2B, NAT-2C),
- ▶ conduct feasibility studies prior to development (REC-1G),
- ▶ conduct a feasibility study to develop a new visitor center (EDU-1C),
- ▶ develop a comprehensive roadway management plan (ROAD -1A),
- ▶ develop a trails management plan (TRAIL-1A),
- ▶ conduct project-specific geotechnical analyses (FAC-1H),
- ▶ conduct noise studies (FAC-1I), and
- ▶ prepare erosion control plans (COAST-2C).

Preparation and implementation of the management plans and investigations or programs may be required before certain management actions may take place. Additional management may be prepared when determined to be necessary by the Department.

The goals and guidelines also delineate 6 potential development areas (Exhibit 3-2), within Sonoma Coast SB that have been determined to be most appropriate for further consideration for future facility development and improvements, which may include the following:

- ▶ a visitor center,
- ▶ environmental campgrounds,
- ▶ campgrounds,
- ▶ alternative overnight facilities,
- ▶ day-use areas,
- ▶ an administrative and operational center,
- ▶ multi-use trails and coastal access,
- ▶ a bike way,
- ▶ a boat launch,
- ▶ scenic viewpoints, and/or
- ▶ parking areas.

The Plan further includes site selection criteria (Table 3-1), which would be applied to determine specific sites within the larger potential development areas that would be most suitable for development or improvement.

The environmental analysis and the consideration of alternatives contained in the Plan were prepared in conformance with CEQA. The environmental analysis is programmatic in scope

and does not contain project-specific analysis for the facilities that are considered in the Plan. However, the Plan also includes guidelines that govern project-level environmental review of site-specific projects to avoid or minimize potential adverse site-specific effects to some resources during construction or operations of the facilities and improvements. Specific projects would also undergo subsequent CEQA review as appropriate. Because the Plan contains goals and guidelines that are designed to avoid or minimize potential adverse environmental effects, no significant program-level impacts were identified. Based on the environmental analysis, the Preferred Alternative was determined to be the environmentally superior alternative because it allows for greatest flexibility in the consideration of environmentally superior development sites while excluding sites with the greatest environmental constraints.