

## Staff Report - Agenda Items 6B and 6C

# General Plan and Final Environmental Impact Report for Big Basin Redwoods State Park

and

## Boundary Amendment for West Waddell Creek State Wilderness

### I. DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

California State Parks recommends that the Commission take two actions related to Big Basin Redwoods State Park by adopting resolutions to:

1. Approve the Preliminary General Plan/Final Environmental Impact Report for Big Basin Redwoods State Park, and
2. Amend the boundaries of the existing West Waddell Creek State Wilderness to add approximately 390 acres of wilderness as proposed by the general plan.

### II. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Big Basin Redwoods State Park consists of more than 18,000 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains, located within 60 miles of major metropolitan centers in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Santa Clara Valley. The general plan process was part of a regional planning effort, along with general plans approved by the Commission on October 31, 2008 for Año Nuevo State Park and Butano State Park. These three parks in proximity to each other share natural, cultural, and visitor demographic characteristics, and face similar issues. This general plan recognizes the close relationship between these California state parks and other nearby public and private lands, and emphasizes the potential for regional collaboration in resource management, recreational use, education and interpretation, and park management.

**General Plan/Environmental Impact Report:** This general plan is the first tier of a tiered General Plan/Final Environmental Impact Report (GP/FEIR) for Big Basin Redwoods State Park that will guide the management and development of this state park for public use and resource protection for the next several decades. The plan establishes goals and guidelines to assist in the daily and long term management of the unit to ensure the natural and cultural resources are protected while allowing for a variety of appropriate recreational opportunities. Projects proposed by the general plan will require subsequent California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance at the time of implementation in the form of second tier environmental evaluations of the potential impacts of the specific project.

The **West Waddell Creek State Wilderness** is a roadless area (about 6,000 acres) established as a state wilderness in 1982 within Big Basin Redwoods State Park. The general plan proposes to expand the wilderness area to include 390 acres of additional lands north to Gazos Creek Road and west to Whitehouse Canyon Road (see Figure 22 map on page 10 of this report). This action will define a more manageable boundary along roads and trails, and encompass additional lands within the West Waddell Creek watershed.

### III. PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTIONS

Big Basin Redwoods State Park is California's oldest state park the first parcels acquired in 1902 and then known as California Redwood Park. With the creation of the State Park

Commission in 1927, the park's name was changed to Big Basin Redwoods State Park. The name and classification was reaffirmed by the Commission in May 1963.

The Declaration of Purpose for the park was approved by the Commission in June 1964 as stated on page 4-4 of the general plan. A revised Declaration of Purpose is proposed on page 4-5 of the general plan, which reflects updated park ownership and the park's current resources.

In July 1969, The Commission approved the proposed boundary lines of Big Basin Redwoods State Park as described on the Department's Land and Boundary Plan (map) that includes both state-owned lands and private properties. The Commission's action established a permanent park boundary to guide future park acquisitions within the natural watersheds of the Waddell and Año Nuevo creeks. Since the 1970s, the California State Parks no longer recognizes proposed boundaries outside the current state ownership, and only identifies private properties that are available from willing sellers in future planning and acquisition programs.

The 23-acre Theodore J. Hoover Natural Preserve was named and classified by the Commission in January 1982 to protect the valuable wildlife habitat and sensitive species of the coastal freshwater and brackish marsh.

The West Waddell Creek State Wilderness was named and classified by the Commission in November 1982, with the provision that Waddell Canyon Road be deleted from the wilderness boundaries, as proposed.

No general plan has previously been adopted for Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

#### **IV. PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS**

The general plan process for Big Basin Redwoods State Park began in September 2001 with public scoping meetings held in Boulder Creek and Los Gatos, California. The first series of meetings identified issues and concerns and gathered input on desired recreational activities in the Santa Cruz Mountains and Central California coast. These meetings were also held concurrently with the planning for Butano State Park and Año Nuevo State Park.

In August 2003, a public planning workshop was held in Boulder Creek to consider planning alternatives. The planning effort stopped and restarted a few times during the next five years, and continued in February 2010 with a public open house in Los Gatos and in Felton, to receive public input and feedback on draft alternatives being considered by the planning team. The initial Notice of Preparation (NOP) was filed in November 2001. Following project delays, a subsequent NOP was filed and circulated in January 2010. A public meeting was held in Felton in March 2011 to present the preferred alternative.

Throughout the planning process, newsletters and the Department's website provided information about the planning process, posted where planning and contact information could be obtained, listed upcoming public meetings and summaries of public comments, and explained or clarified major issues and planning proposals. Newsletters and public notices were posted on the website and mailed to individuals, organizations, and agencies from a mailing list containing approximately 750 addresses.

California State Parks circulated the Preliminary General Plan/Draft EIR for a 55-day review period, beginning on June 18, 2012 and ending August 10, 2012. Thirty four comment letters and email messages were received during this review period. The comments and Department responses are contained in the Final Environmental Impact Report/Response to Comments, dated April 2013.

## V. HISTORY OF PROJECT

Established in 1902 through the efforts of the Sempervirens Club, Big Basin Redwoods State Park was the first park in today's California State Park System and is historically significant as one of the first public commitments to environmental preservation and outdoor recreation. The entire original 3,800 acres of the park has been nominated as a National Historic Landmark. During the last 100 years, subsequent acquisitions have expanded the park ownership to over 18,000 acres extending from Waddell Beach at Highway 1 inland to Waterman Gap at Highway 9. The park's history, from early California Indians to the present, is provided in Chapter 2 of the General Plan beginning on page 2-54.

Elevations within the park range from sea level to over 2,000 feet. Three watersheds (Waddell Creek, East Waddell Creek, and Scott Creek) form the dominant landscape features of the park. Approximately 6,000 acres within the state park are designated as state wilderness, and together with the backcountry (10,500 acres) constitute 85% of the park, offering quiet solitude among the large evergreen trees and steep canyon slopes.

The Headquarters area, located along Highway 236, has the highest concentration of development and visitor activity in the park, with campgrounds, interpretive facilities, picnic areas, store and gift shop, and trails situated under the towering redwoods. Remnants of the park's early history, including Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)-era and post-World War II construction, are present in varying degrees of preservation.

At Waddell Beach, the big surf, persistent winds, and ease of access attract surfers, kite surfers, windsurfers, and spectators to this well-known water sport venue. Inland from Highway 1 is the Rancho del Oso (RDO) sub-unit and the 23-acre Theodore J. Hoover Natural Preserve. This area includes remnants of the early Theodore Hoover farm operations, the Nature and History Center, an equestrian camp, and trailhead facilities.

In 2011, the Little Basin property (535 acres) was acquired and added to Big Basin Redwoods State Park. It includes a developed campground and group recreation facilities.

## VI. ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

The primary planning issues addressed by the general plan included: vegetation, wildlife and habitat protection; rehabilitation and preservation of significant historic resources; public access and circulation; and recreation demand and visitor opportunities. These and other issues are discussed in Chapter 3 of the General Plan, on pages 3-1 through 3-8.

Key issues that may be discussed during the Commission's consideration of this plan could include the following:

1. Protection and management of old growth redwood forest and marbled murrelet critical habitat.
2. Saddle Mountain and Little Basin development impacts.
3. Developed recreation facilities within the old growth forest (Headquarters Area).
4. Proposed cabins in Sky Meadow area.
5. State Wilderness expansion.

### **ISSUE #1: Protection and management of old growth redwood forest and critical habitat for the endangered marbled murrelet.**

Big Basin Redwoods State Park has the largest remaining stand of old-growth trees in this region. Old-growth coastal redwoods provide habitat for the marbled murrelets, although

this area is the very southern-most reach and supports a small and fairly isolated population. California State Parks received letters from different agencies expressing concern about the management efforts at Big Basin Redwoods State Park to preserve and protect the marbled murrelet and this old growth habitat. Letters also expressed opposition to the preferred alternative and general plan proposals that may have an adverse impact on the long-term recovery and survival of the Santa Cruz Mountains marbled murrelet population.

In the Final EIR, a review of the studies done in the last ten years shows that challenges to marbled murrelet survival are varied and inconsistent from year to year and location to location. Predation is one of the variables that have been implicated in the decline of the murrelet population. Given the secretive nature of the marbled murrelets and the lack of nest observations, data on local predation rates is exceedingly difficult to generate. The data on local predation rates and nest distribution is over ten years old and based on 19 individual nests from 1989 to 2002. From 2002 to the present, there has been no discernible trend of increase or decrease.

Based on at-sea surveys (the most direct measure of population trends), the species has declined, perhaps up to 30% throughout the range. However, data from adult/juvenile ratios of the local population appears to indicate some improvement for the central California population.

In 2005, improved trash management and corvid depredation efforts began in Big Basin Redwoods State Park. State Parks continues its support for predator control and has directed studies aimed at reducing the rate of nest predation. Towards this goal, State Parks is working with California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to promote and support methodologies that, in addition to controlling the numbers of predators, would directly address the rate of predation.

#### **Analysis/Recommendation:**

Chapter 4 of the General Plan includes resource protection guidelines and measures for adaptive management that will be incorporated into subsequent planning, design, and environmental review to ensure that new programs and facilities achieve the desired outcomes and stated goals of the plan, and to avoid significant adverse impacts on park resources.

However, in response to the concerns articulated by various letter writers, State Parks finds that research is still on-going as to the causes of the species decline. The commitment to predator control and support for other methodologies that would address the rate of decline serves as mitigation for proposed activities. In addition, State Parks has reduced the number of cabins in the redwood grove and moved some activities from the old grove area. However, State Parks finds that there is a significant, unavoidable impact due to the speculative nature of the research at this time. It is unclear what is causing the decline in numbers, whether it be disturbance of habitat, predation, loss of other habitat in other areas. Conversely, it cannot be said with certainty that the activity of State Park visitors in the old-grove redwoods is the reason for the dwindling numbers. This lack of definitive information leaves State Parks in a position of speculation and thus, choosing to make the required overriding findings for a significant unavoidable impact.

The collaborative efforts between California State Parks, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other interested partners shall continue to educate park visitors at Big Basin Redwoods State Park and develop strategies to help improve the status of the marbled murrelet, including directed studies aimed at reducing the rate of nest predation. These continued efforts to reduce numbers of corvids must include

region-wide education and control efforts, with important training, mapping, and sharing resource information for effective management at all state parks in this region.

## **ISSUE #2: Saddle Mountain and Little Basin development impacts.**

California State Parks received several letters from residents and property owners in the vicinity of Saddle Mountain and Little Basin expressing concerns for public safety, law enforcement, and potential impacts from increased use and future development in this area of the park.

**Saddle Mountain** is located at the intersection of Highway 236 and Little Basin Road. The Department supports interim use of this site for the current outdoor environmental education program and is currently negotiating a lease extension with the non-profit organization, although the general plan reflects the site's greater potential for other long-term uses, including a welcome center for visitors, ranger offices, visitor parking and shuttle services, and opportunities for recreation, interpretation and education programs. Alternative sites within the Santa Cruz Mountains, such as Gazos Mountain Camp, are being considered by the non-profit organizations for potential outdoor environmental education programs. In planning for this state park, the emphasis was on the preservation of the old growth redwood forest and the need to reduce the environmental impacts and intensity of use in the Headquarters area. The planning team considered several alternatives to remove, relocate, or develop new facilities outside the old growth forest and reduce the traffic movements in and out of the Headquarters area. Little Basin and Saddle Mountain properties represent the best areas in the park to serve this purpose.

**Little Basin Road:** The county-owned and maintained Little Basin Road presently serves as the primary vehicle access to the state park property at Little Basin. It also serves several private residences along this road. California State Parks' goal for Little Basin is to continue serving the public with "group" recreation opportunities, in part to help regulate visitor access and vehicle traffic on Little Basin Road. The type and level of use remains consistent with the previous use for group recreation activities and past operations prior to California State Parks' ownership.

The general plan supports group recreation, environmental education, and special event opportunities. It also states that further site studies, resource monitoring and recreation surveys are needed to determine the long-term management, development and use of the Little Basin property. New development, such as a concession-developed and operated overnight lodge with group dining facilities and additional cabins, are included in the general plan for future consideration. Additional site planning, studies, and second-level environmental review would be necessary to determine the scope, potential impacts, and viability of such a development and its relationship with the current use and operations at Little Basin. At this broad stage of planning, the general plan guides State Parks to coordinate with Santa Cruz County on identifying road improvements and county maintenance actions.

### **Analysis/Recommendation:**

With proper site planning and design, the concept for a new welcome center and shuttle system at Saddle Mountain would provide a relief valve for congested traffic, limited parking, and impacted resources in the Headquarters area during peak visitation periods. To avoid shifting this problem from one area to another, the general plan stipulates that further parking and traffic analysis of the major roadways in these two areas would be necessary. Provisions for visitor and non-visitor traffic through the park would be maintained on State Highway 236. Site-specific planning will include coordination with Caltrans, County of Santa

Cruz, and Cal Fire to ensure proper design and public safety considerations for the intersection of Highway 236 and Little Basin Road, with provisions for public transit, shuttle parking, and ADA accommodations. Site-specific projects would also include public input and second-level environmental review.

California State Parks will continue to monitor and evaluate the visitor use at Little Basin and the county road conditions, and work together with other neighbors to address problem areas and make recommendations to the county regarding the community's needs. For any new development, State Parks would coordinate with the County of Santa Cruz and Caltrans to initiate traffic and engineering studies for Little Basin Road and its intersection with Highway 236.

### **ISSUE #3: Developed recreation facilities within the old growth forest (Park Headquarters Area).**

State Parks received letters from Audubon California, Santa Cruz Mountains Bioregional Council, and the Center for Biological Diversity stating that the preferred alternative would increase visitor use of the park and further impact plant and wildlife habitat. Their concerns are centered on the protection of the marbled murrelet and old growth habitat and they have submitted several recommendations including the removal of some or all of the camping and picnic facilities within the old growth forest.

Campgrounds, picnic areas, and historic buildings remain from the park's early period of recreation development and preservation efforts. To protect resources and public safety, several buildings and campsites were removed from the Headquarters area over the past 60 years. Some people would like to see all development removed from this area to preserve the old growth forest and its associated habitats. Historic buildings are protected and preserved for their cultural resource values and collectively for their national significance. The buildings are utilized for various functions that aid in their long-term preservation, which are accompanied by essential support facilities for public access, education, and recreational enjoyment. Accessibility improvements are currently being made to buildings and parking lots in the Headquarters area to accommodate all visitors to this area within the old growth forest. Interpretive activities and campfire programs help educate park visitors (campers, picnickers, hikers), and inspire youth outdoor environmental education programs. These park programs help visitors understand the park's history, forest ecology and its associated plant and wildlife habitats, and promote a greater public awareness of the resource sensitivities, potential human impacts, and educate park visitors on what they can do to help preserve the park's valuable resources.

#### **Analysis/Recommendation:**

The general plan emphasizes the preservation of the old growth forest and the park's natural resources, utilizing sustainable management practices to improve the ecology and health of the coast redwood forest and associated habitat. To accomplish this goal, the plan calls for relocating or removing some existing facilities (e.g. individual campsites, picnic sites, trails, etc.), where necessary, and implementing effective management strategies to protect sensitive resources and avoid or reduce significant adverse impacts. No new buildings are proposed within the old growth forest.

Historic buildings and support facilities would remain in the Headquarters area to provide visitors with educational benefits through outdoor recreation and interpretive programs, so long as these facilities and visitor use can be managed to avoid further degradation to the significant natural and cultural resources.

#### **ISSUE #4: Proposed cabins in Sky Meadow area**

State Parks received letters of concern for the general plan proposal of up to 10 new cabins in the vicinity of Sky Meadow, due to the site's location in proximity to old growth forest and marbled murrelet habitat. The Sempervirens Fund also indicated that these cabins would be too close to the dedicated memorial trees in this area.

#### **Analysis/Recommendation:**

California State Parks staff conducted additional site reviews and prepared a more detailed resource description of the Sky Meadow area. After further investigation of the resources and site conditions that exist in the Sky Meadow area, the proposal for cabins near Sky Meadow has been deleted from the general plan. Additional goals and guidelines will be added to the final general plan to protect resources and upgrade parking and infrastructure to support continued use of the Sky Meadow Group Camp (see Attachment A on page 11 of this report).

#### **ISSUE #5: State Wilderness Expansion**

The West Waddell Creek State Wilderness (5,810 acres) encompasses about 75% of the Waddell Creek watershed. When designated in 1982, this wilderness area extended to the state park's northern boundary. Since then, additional lands have been acquired to the north. When the Commission approved the state wilderness, it excluded the Waddell Canyon Road from the state wilderness boundaries to allow for authorized vehicle access for fire protection and public safety purposes. This road currently provides bicycle access on the Skyline to the Sea Trail 4.5 miles inland from Highway 1. The proposed wilderness addition encompasses 390 acres north of the existing wilderness boundary up to Gazos Creek Road and Whitehouse Canyon Road. These lands are within the West Waddell Creek watershed and the topography and landscape characteristics are the same as the adjacent wilderness. The general plan proposed an adjustment to the wilderness boundary to include these lands that are absent of any roads or trails (see Figure 22 map on page 10).

During the general plan process, California State Parks received a letter from the California Wilderness Coalition recommending that additional lands in Big Basin Redwoods State Park be evaluated for expanding the designated state wilderness. Seven different areas of the backcountry were evaluated, but only one of these areas satisfied State Parks' goals for wilderness designation. The other six areas evaluated include existing trails and/or roads, with some potential for development of backcountry multi-use trails. A future Roads and Trails Management Plan will describe in detail the status of existing and new park roads and trails, and determine if any additional areas within this state park are appropriate for future wilderness designation.

### **VII. LEGAL ISSUES**

There are no known legal issues relating to the State Park and Recreation Commission's approval of the General Plan/Final Environmental Impact Report for Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

### **VIII. FISCAL IMPACT**

There is no immediate fiscal impact as a result of adoption of the General Plan.

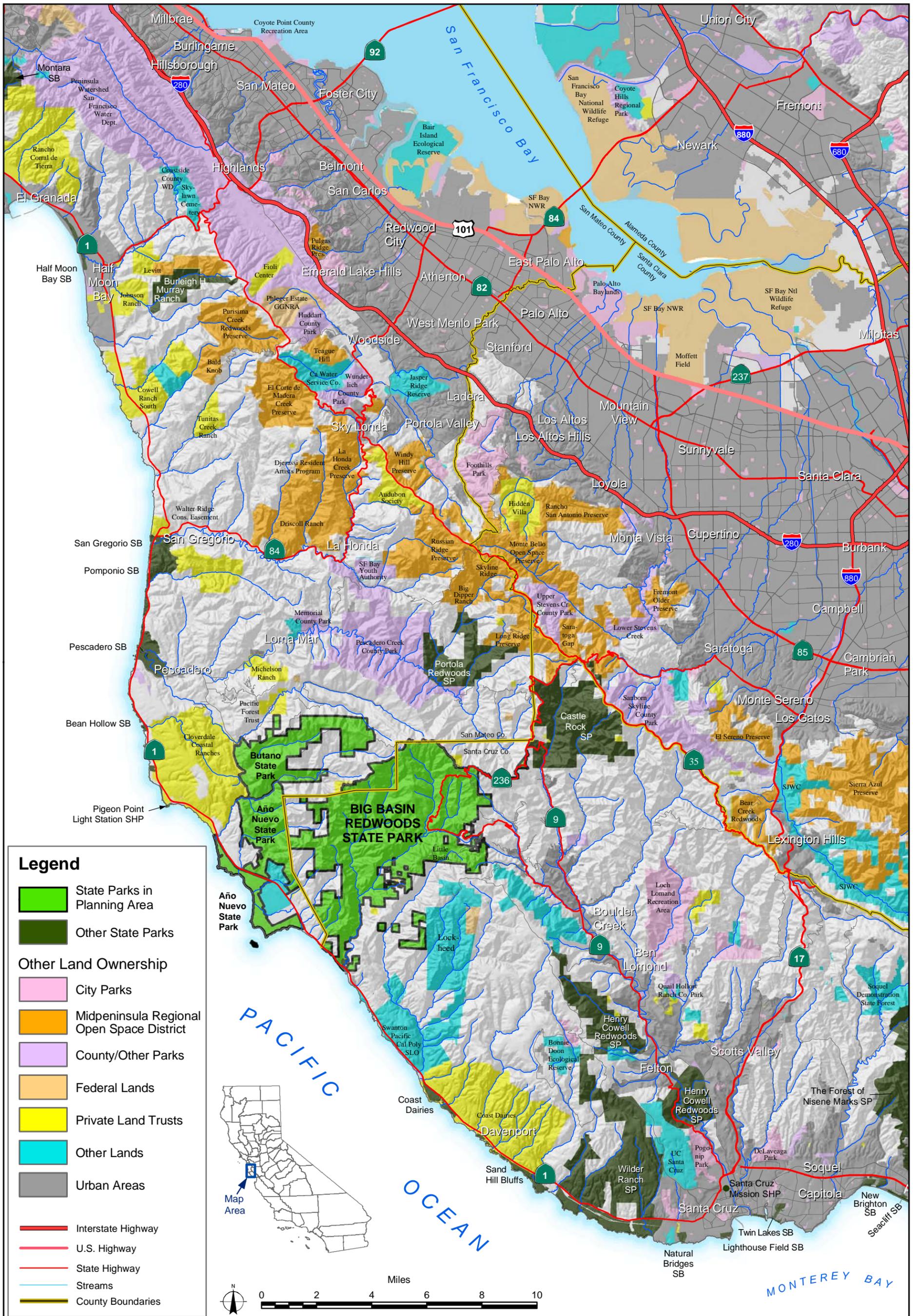
Significant additional revenues and concession opportunities in this park are considered to be minimal for the foreseeable future.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Figure 1 - Regional Map - Park Location/Vicinity.

Figure 22 - General Plan Map showing the West Waddell Creek State Wilderness proposed expansion.

Attachment A: Sky Meadow Goals and Guidelines.



Date: 10/5/11  
 Sources:  
 DPR GIS,  
 County Parcel Maps,  
 Peninsula  
 Conservation  
 Center, GreenInfo  
 Protected Lands DB.

**BIG BASIN REDWOODS SP  
 GENERAL PLAN  
 Figure 1**

**REGIONAL MAP**

**NOTES:**

Parcel boundaries are approximate and should not be considered legal descriptions. Maps are intended for study purposes only.

PLANNING  
 DIVISION  
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 GENERAL PLAN  
 SECTION



# BIG BASIN REDWOODS STATE PARK DRAFT GENERAL PLAN PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILDERNESS & BACKCOUNTRY

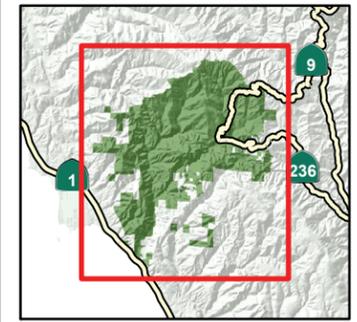
## WILDERNESS / BACKCOUNTRY GOALS

- Management intent is to preserve and protect the wild and remote natural landscape of the wilderness and backcountry areas, with opportunities for visitor experiences.
- Complete and maintain resource inventories and prepare management plans for long-term public access, protection and interpretation of significant resources.
- Prepare an Interpretation Master Plan to provide further parkwide guidance and recommendations for interpreting the park's history, resources and recreational opportunities.
- Develop additional loop trails for hikers and equestrians, and establish sustainable creek crossings and drainages to reduce erosion and stream sedimentation.
- Make provisions for low impact recreational use of the backcountry, with additional trailhead parking and trail camps, and multi-use trails. Develop a park-wide Roads and Trails Management Plan, with goals for regional trail connections and linkages from the ridgetops to the coast highway. Consider a potential multi-use trail connection outside the state wilderness between Hihn Hammond Road/Trail and the Skyline-to-the-Sea Trail at West Waddell Creek.

### LEGEND

- Museum/ Visitor Center
- Campfire Center
- Campground
- Group Camp
- Horse Camp
- Trail Camp
- Office / Visitor Center
- Hiking Trail
- Horses Allowed
- Unpaved Roads
- Paved Roads
- State Highway
- BIG BASIN REDWOODS STATE PARK
- West Waddell Creek State Wilderness
- Nearby State Parks
- County Boundary
- Stream, Perennial
- Stream, Intermittent
- Proposed Wilderness Addition

Map Location, showing Big Basin Redwoods SP Area

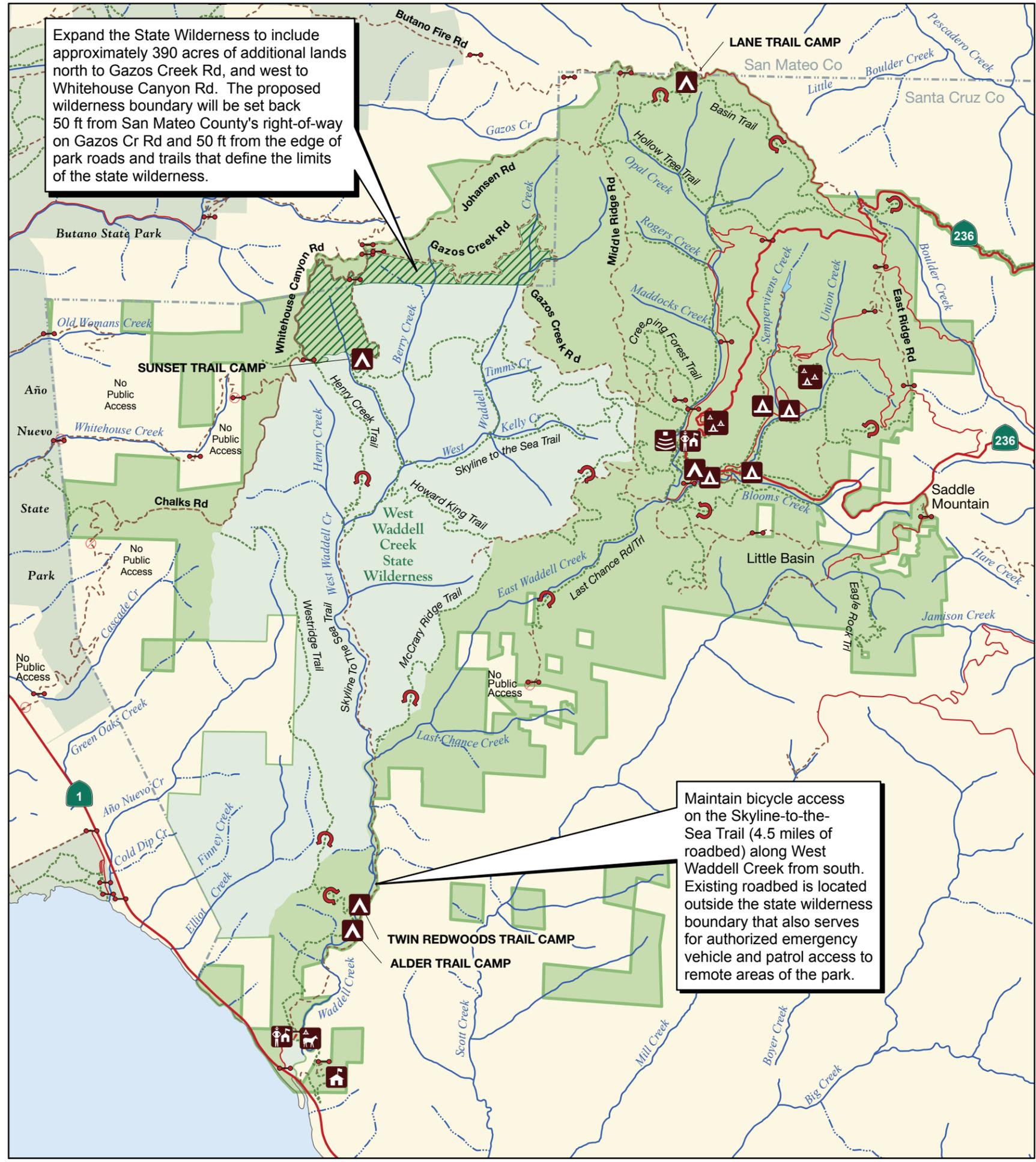


Scale  
1:56,586  
1 inch = 4,715 feet  
Miles  
0 0.5 1

**NOTES:**  
Parcel boundaries are approximate and should not be considered legal descriptions. Maps are intended for study purposes only.

PLANNING DIVISION  
GENERAL PLAN SECTION

Date 10/06/11  
Sources:  
Calif. Dept. of Parks & Recreation  
**Figure 22**



Expand the State Wilderness to include approximately 390 acres of additional lands north to Gazos Creek Rd, and west to Whitehouse Canyon Rd. The proposed wilderness boundary will be set back 50 ft from San Mateo County's right-of-way on Gazos Cr Rd and 50 ft from the edge of park roads and trails that define the limits of the state wilderness.

Maintain bicycle access on the Skyline-to-the-Sea Trail (4.5 miles of roadbed) along West Waddell Creek from south. Existing roadbed is located outside the state wilderness boundary that also serves for authorized emergency vehicle and patrol access to remote areas of the park.

## Attachment A:

# SKY MEADOW GOALS AND GUIDELINES

To further guide the protection of Sky Meadow and its associated habitat, a description of Sky Meadow, with additional goals and guideline revisions, will be added to page 4-59 of the General Plan as follows:

### Sky Meadow:

The Sky Meadow area is comprised of the Lower Sky Meadow residential area and the Sky Meadow group camp, located on either side of a four-acre wet meadow. The structures providing staff housing within the 1940s residential area are clustered in a flat grassy area surrounded to the north by remnant native perennial bunchgrasses and chaparral transitioning to a Douglas-fir and oak-dominated canopy. The south side of this developed area is bordered by mature coast live oak and well-spaced old growth redwoods and Douglas-fir. A spur road off Sky Meadow Road provides access to the group camp along a gentle ridge dominated by old growth redwood clumps, huge Douglas-fir and mature coast live oak and madrone. The first parking area for the group camp sits below a wet swale where the forest floor is dominated by sedges, rushes and an uncommon occurrence of California fescue. Saturated soils are evidenced by several large uprooted trees. Sky Meadow itself is a wet meadow with rhizomatous sedges, rushes and large patches of California oat grass and Santa Barbara sedge. The perimeter is surrounded by clusters of redwoods, large coast live oaks and Santa Cruz Mountain oaks.

***Lower Sky Meadow Goal:** Protect and preserve historic residences and associated features and structures that contribute to the nominated National Register Historic District located in the Lower Sky Meadow residential area.*

### **Lower Sky Meadow Guidelines:**

**Lower Sky Meadow 1:** Conduct site-specific surveys and investigations for sensitive plant and animal species protection, and coordinate with the Sempervirens Fund early in the site planning to locate new facilities and avoid dedicated trees and memorial groves.

**Lower Sky Meadow 2:** Allow for development of additional staff housing, trailer pads, and amenities outside of the designated National Register boundaries of the Lower Sky Meadow residence area when addressing future housing needs, to maintain the historic integrity of this significant 1940s residence area.

**Sky Meadow Group Camp area:**

*Sky Meadow Group Camp Goal: Provide for group recreation and preserve the wet meadow and surrounding old growth redwood and Douglas-fir forest habitats.*

***Sky Meadow Group Camp Guidelines:***

**Sky Meadow Group Camp 1:** Limit visitor use of the meadow to the existing historic Girl Scout camping platform and adjoining trail.

**Sky Meadow Group Camp 2:** Upgrade parking and utilities infrastructure to support continued use of existing facilities.

**Sky Meadow Group Camp 3:** Minimize disturbances to marbled murrelet breeding habitat by locating future visitor amenities outside the old growth forest.