

Cannabis Watershed Protection Program

Impact Report: The First Five Years

Protecting and Restoring State Parks Watersheds



Restoring Damaged Watersheds and Safeguarding Park Landscapes for the Future

Over the past four decades, more than 400 illegal cannabis cultivation sites have been identified in 55 state park units, and almost every park in the system sits within a watershed affected by cannabis cultivation. Until recently, California State Parks lacked the resources and capacity to adequately address the effects of these illegal grow sites. That changed five years ago when State Parks launched the Cannabis Watershed Protection Program (CWPP) — a first-of-its-kind effort funded with tax revenues from legal cannabis sales to address the impacts of illegal cultivation on state park lands. What began as a focused response to eradicate and remediate grow sites has expanded into a statewide model for environmental restoration as well as interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration. At its core, the CWPP brings together scientists, state park peace officers, interpreters, roads and trails specialists, geologists, administrative staff, cultural resources specialists, strategic planners and geographers around a shared mission: to restore damaged ecosystems, safeguard biodiversity and protect parks from future harm. This multidisciplinary team — linking enforcement with restoration and access with stewardship — works to bring balance back to California’s park watersheds. In just five years, the CWPP has expanded from a small nascent program to a departmental example of what can be accomplished through

sustained and engaged collaboration. Starting as a group of 53 staff and expanding to more than 110 statewide, the CWPP has funded projects in more than 50 park units, restoring stream corridors, removing waste and toxins and building relationships with local partners and communities. None of this could have been achieved without the cooperation and investment from the field staff.



Unique to California State Parks, this multifaceted team brings a holistic approach to the complex work of protecting parks from illegal cannabis cultivation and restoring ecological processes in degraded watersheds.

While our progress is measurable, our commitment is unwavering. The CWPP will continue to build on the foundation laid out over the first five years, prioritizing landscape-scale restoration and working across disciplines and divisions to implement its mission and vision. The CWPP has proven that when we work together, we can fulfill the mission of State Parks to protect healthy landscapes for generations to come.

Peter Barnes
Environmental Program Manager I
Natural Resources Division

Evan Walter
Deputy Chief
Law Enforcement and Emergency Services Division

Mission

To restore watersheds affected by cannabis cultivation and to steward and operate State Parks in a manner that prevents negative impacts of cannabis, thereby providing enduring resource protection and safe public access.

California State Parks — home to the nation’s largest state park system — plays a vital role in safeguarding the state’s most cherished landscapes and its natural and cultural resources. Preventing and repairing the environmental harm caused by illegal cannabis cultivation is a top priority of the Cannabis Watershed Protection Program. This work is essential to our broader mission of keeping parks and surrounding communities safe, healthy and protected for generations to come.

“**Armando Quintero**
Director
California State Parks

Vision

Cannabis-impacted watersheds are operated and stewarded to:

- Discourage, quickly identify, remediate and prevent incompatible activities.
- Restore and adaptively manage ecosystem functions.
- Protect and interpret natural and cultural resources.
- Ensure improved public access is safe and enriching.

Impact

- 158** grow sites remediated
- 73,000 pounds** of grow site waste removed
- 111,000 feet** of irrigation tubing removed
- 125** full-time positions funded
- \$9 million** allocated to district operations and stewardship
- \$9 million** allocated to district natural resource ongoing maintenance
- \$82 million** disbursed across 76 restoration projects



Eradicating Illegal Cultivation in State Parks

Through coordinated multi-agency efforts, the CWPP is turning the tide on illegal cultivation — keeping California’s parks safe for all.

State Parks’ Special Enforcement Team (SET) plays a vital role in protecting California’s 1.6 million acres of parklands from the impacts of illegal cannabis cultivation. SET consists of specially trained state park peace officers who work to proactively identify and prevent illegal cannabis cultivation affecting park watersheds. SET has led 58 law enforcement operations targeting illegal cannabis cultivation sites impacting State Parks and it has been a key player in 130 operations with the Unified Cannabis Enforcement Taskforce (UCETF) and 685 operations with the Department of Justice’s multi-agency Eradication and Prevention of Illicit Cannabis (EPIC) program.

SET plays a crucial role in supporting park districts throughout the state by:

- Working with local staff to quickly respond to cannabis enforcement issues.
- Providing patrol coverage and reconnaissance at former park grow sites to ensure safety.
- Working alongside other program areas to remove waste left behind by growers.

SET’s enforcement efforts play an important role in building a safer and more sustainable legal cannabis industry. Their work highlights the power of collaboration in enforcing cannabis laws and protecting California’s public lands.



SET assists with cleaning a cannabis cultivation site at Henry W. Coe State Park, part of the more than 73,000 pounds of waste removed from grow sites within state parks.



SET officer conducts a law enforcement operation at Great Valley Grasslands State Park. Over the last five years, the CWPP has removed more than 84,000 cannabis plants growing in state parks.



From left: Frank Imbrie, Assistant Chief, California Department of Fish and Wildlife; Rob Bonta, California Attorney General; and Jeremy Stinson, Assistant Chief, CWPP, at a 2024 EPIC press conference at Los Angeles State Historic Park.

As part of the 2024 EPIC program, California Attorney General Rob Bonta announced the eradication of more than 774,000 illegal cannabis plants, seizure of 106,000 pounds of processed cannabis and 282 arrests, with an estimated underground market value of \$353 million. This multi-agency effort, focused on combating the environmental, economic and labor impacts of illegal cultivation, also led to the recovery of 201 weapons and removal of toxic chemicals and infrastructure threatening California’s ecosystems.

Impact

84,000 cannabis plants removed

9,038 pounds of processed cannabis removed

37 suspects arrested

42 firearms confiscated

58 SET operations

130 UCETF operations

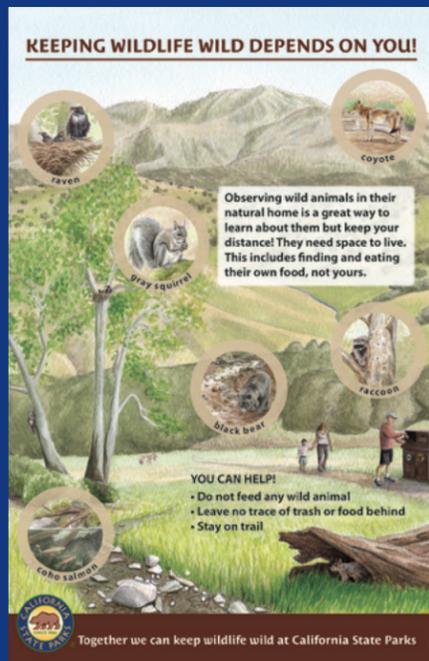
685 EPIC operations

These stats represent combined totals from internal State Parks sites (inside of State Parks properties) and park impacting - external sites (outside of but adjacent to and / or affecting State Parks properties).

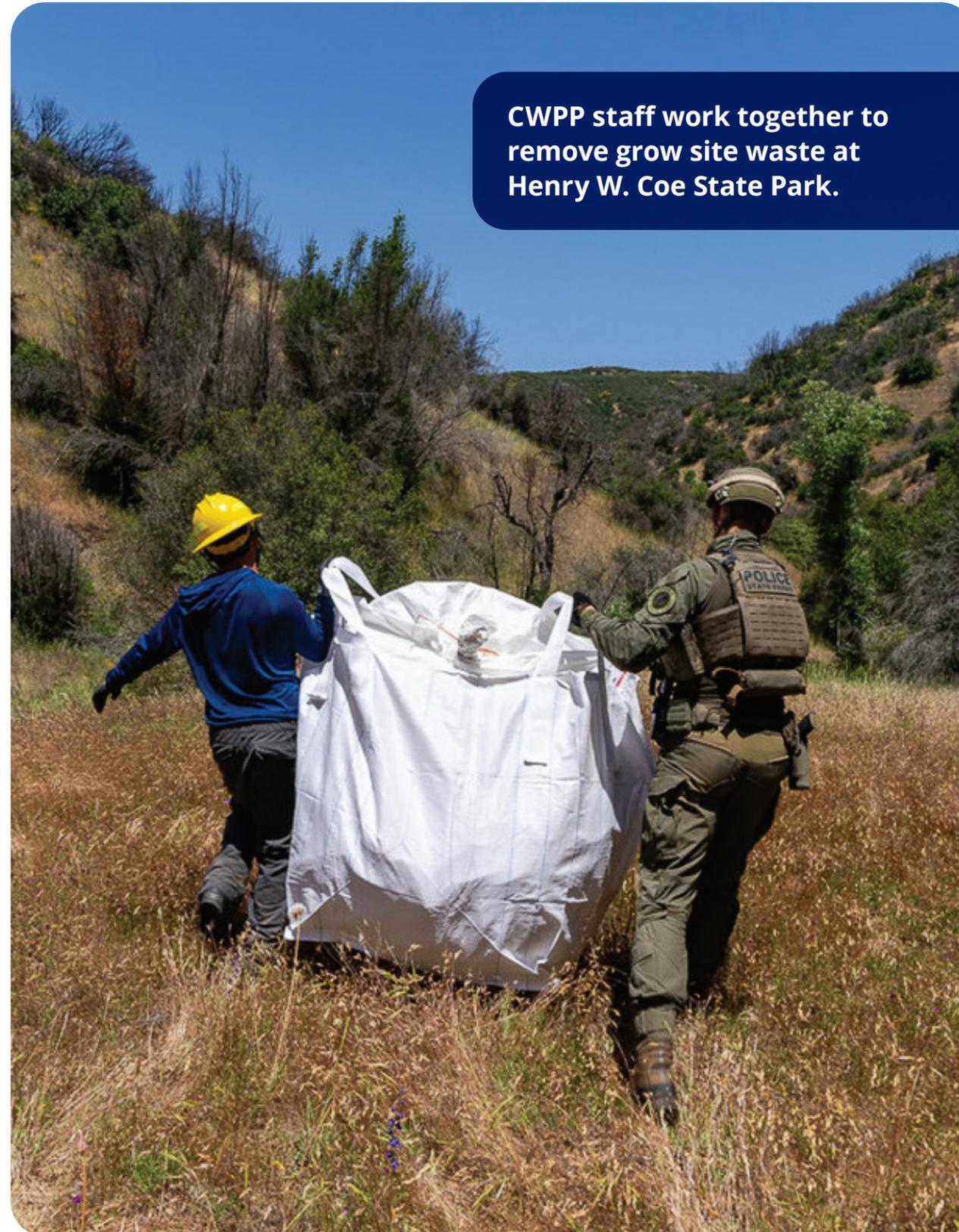
Cleaning Up after Illegal Cultivation

Remediation is the first, critical step helping to halt environmental degradation, secure any hazardous materials and discourage reoccupation. Remediation includes the removal of infrastructure, debris, plants and other garbage; returning terraced slopes, tent pads, cisterns and dams to natural grade and hydrology; eradicating nonnative plants; and stabilizing any archaeological resources occurring within the disturbed area of the grow site. Within the first five years, the CWPP has remediated 158 sites, removing more than 73,000 pounds of waste that includes over 20 miles of irrigation tubing and addressed 667 instances of hazardous waste.

Some of these sites may have existed on the landscape for decades. Even with thorough remediation, the CWPP will never be able to fully mitigate or remove all of the trash that has been dispersed across the natural landscape. As a result, the CWPP is working to limit other sources of trash entering State Parks ecosystems by funding the installation of wildlife-proof trash bins and food lockers in many park units.



The CWPP has funded thousands of new wildlife-proof trash bins across the park system with educational signage in both English and Spanish.



Habitation site within a cannabis grow at Sonoma Coast State Park.



Trash left behind at grow sites often includes highly toxic herbicides and rodenticides that harm park wildlife.



State Parks staff have removed over 20 miles of irrigation tubing used to water cannabis plants.

From Ridge to River:

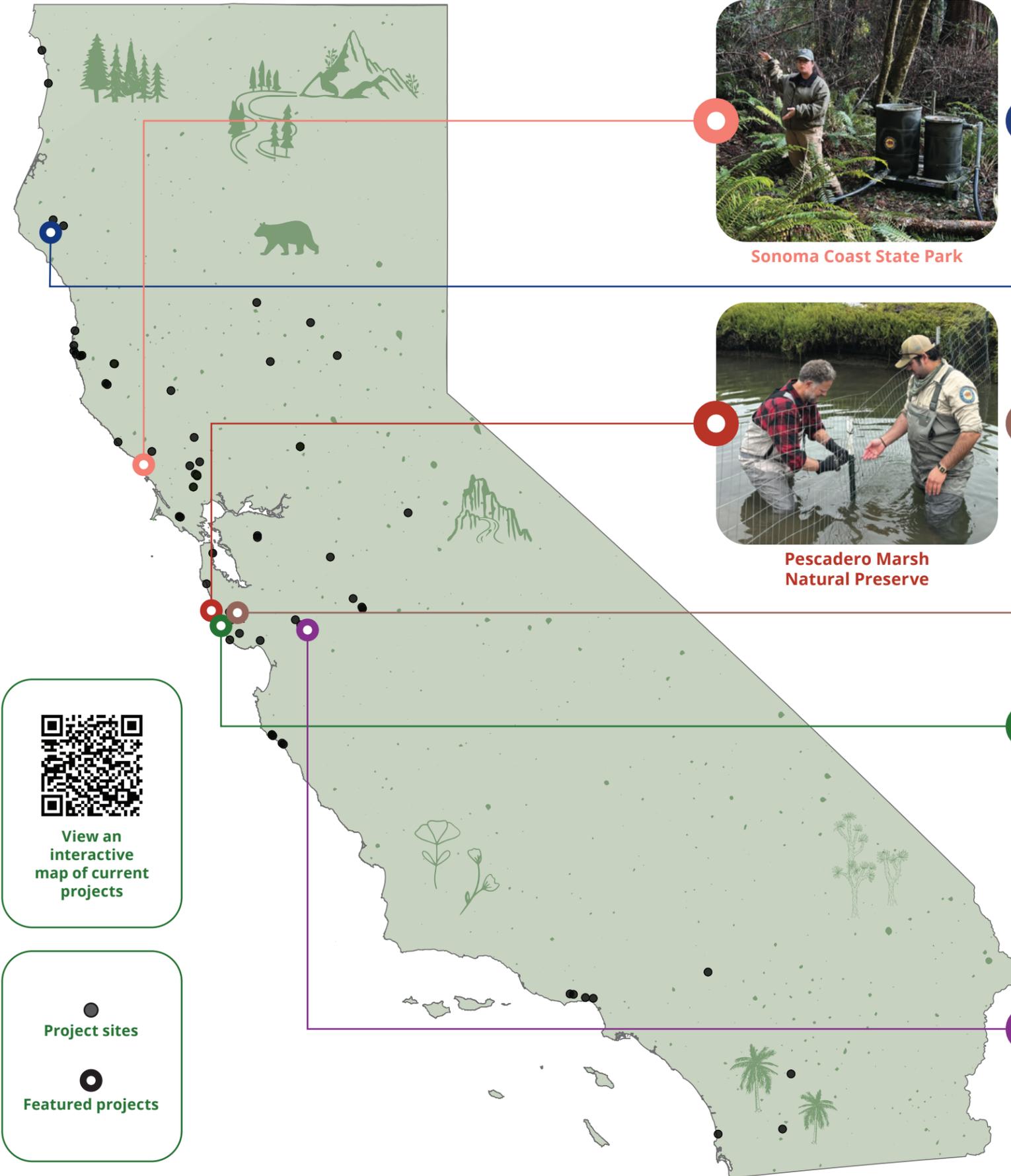
Restoring Watersheds across California

The CWPP is collaborating with multiple nonprofit and government entities to accelerate and scale ecosystem restoration efforts within our state parks, with a focus on removing fish passage barriers, improving water quality and availability and promoting forest health.

Innovating Geospatial Services

The CWPP Geographic Information System (GIS) was created as a comprehensive architecture for data capture, analysis and sharing reliable, actionable data across all CWPP disciplines. The system allows teams to collaborate seamlessly, ensuring information is consistent and timely. The GIS program has also evolved and expanded its capabilities: exporting data for law enforcement applications, integrating aerial imagery and land ownership information, developing dashboards and data collection applications and automatically sharing secure, vetted data across partner organizations (UCETF). The GIS team will continue to seek out the best available technological solutions and datasets, including drone systems, to innovate, foster collaboration and strengthen the insightful management and protection of California State Parks.

Understanding the importance of geospatial data in effective land management, the CWPP has invested heavily in GIS systems and data, even partnering with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the State Water Resources Control Board to purchase biennial statewide, high resolution aerial imagery datasets. Aside from assisting in identifying potential grow sites, supporting law enforcement operations and informing restoration project development, the imagery also identifies vegetation cover, documents canopy changes and demonstrates the long-term impacts and recovery from wildfires.



Sonoma Coast State Park



Humboldt Redwoods State Park



Pescadero Marsh Natural Preserve



Castle Rock State Park



Santa Cruz District



Henry W. Coe State Park

View an interactive map of current projects

● Project sites

● Featured projects

Restoring Park Watersheds

California has thousands of interconnected waterways that flow through its dynamic landscapes. The CWPP Natural Resources team recognizes that the health of watersheds outside of California State Parks land is invariably tied to the health of those within. They work statewide with federal and state agencies, local governments, nonprofit groups, private contractors and Resource Conservation Districts (RCD), leading to a highly functional program that carries out comprehensive restoration projects to address ecological impacts of illegal cannabis cultivation and increase watershed resilience across California.



○ Humboldt Redwoods State Park



The Humboldt Redwoods State Park Watershed Restoration Project is removing 24 miles of abandoned logging roads, improving 55 stream crossings, thinning more than 600 acres of Douglas fir-tanoak forest, surface hardening 12 miles of all-season road and adding hundreds of large wood structures to the streams to improve habitat and slow downstream sediment transport.

○ Sonoma Coast State Park



In Sonoma Coast State Park, State Parks collaborated with the Gold Ridge RCD to promote Coho salmon species recovery through the fabrication and installation of remote site incubators. The incubators are placed in the creek and use gravity flow to circulate water for the eggs, and the fish are released directly into the creek once they become fry. Releasing the incubator fish as fry will allow them to develop in natural stream conditions, including dynamic flows and the presence of predators. Fish released as fry have the opportunity to develop physically and behaviorally in ways unavailable to fish released as juveniles from the hatchery. The incubators will receive up to 90,000 Coho salmon eggs from the Warm Springs Fish Hatchery over a three-year project term with a goal of 90 percent survival.

○ Pescadero Marsh Natural Preserve

In partnership with the San Mateo RCD, State Parks restored ecological function and improved resilience to climate change in the North Marsh and North Pond within the Pescadero Marsh Natural Preserve. The project partially removed the levee, ditch and culvert system that controlled water flows, restoring the marsh's natural processes. This restoration project delivered a broad range of habitat, climate and water-quality benefits and will provide a new interpretive trail experience for park visitors to enjoy the beauty and diversity of the marsh.



Improving Access for All

When the CWPP was established, State Parks recognized that safe ingress and egress within parks was essential to land management activities that discourage, prevent and address illegal cannabis cultivation. With more than 4,500 miles of system backcountry roads and trails, the CWPP Roads and Trails team supports local park managers by consistently funding maintenance activities and projects that restore watershed health, protect natural and cultural resources and improve sustainable access for all.

Program Highlights

25 miles
of road removed

17 miles
of road improved

15 miles
of trail improved

291 miles
of trail maintained

○ Castle Rock State Park

Near the headwaters of the San Lorenzo River, Hansen Road, an abandoned one-mile road, had caused erosion, diverted water and yielded access for illegal cannabis cultivators. CWPP staff removed trash and infrastructure before fully restoring the natural topography, promoting watershed health and habitat recovery.



Statewide Youth Corps Partnerships and Trail Maintenance

Unmaintained trails significantly contribute to park resource damage and can be exploited by illegal cannabis cultivators. Bolstered by youth corps partnerships — California Conservation Corps, American Conservation Experience, Farmworkers Institute of Leadership and Development and Eastern Sierra Conservation Corps — trail specialists have collaborated to maintain 291 miles of trail in 14 of the State Parks' 21 districts, with nearly \$7 million invested so far.



○ Henry W. Coe State Park



Supported by a dedicated crew from the California Conservation Corps, CWPP staff rerouted one mile of eroded, unmaintainable legacy road. The new alignment, through sustainable and fire-resilient design, improves access for visitors and park staff, discourages future cannabis cultivation and enhances the Coyote Creek watershed.

Protecting Cultural Resources

The CWPP Cultural Resources team ensures that remediation and restoration efforts begin with properly identifying and protecting sensitive cultural sites. To prepare for future restoration projects, the team works with local parks staff, contractors and tribal communities to collect baseline cultural data in park units that have not previously had comprehensive cultural surveys completed. This information helps identify sensitive sites early, guiding project planning and protecting cultural resources for years to come.

Using cutting-edge technology and innovative methods, the team has advanced how buried

cultural materials are found, helping avoid accidental discoveries during construction phases of restoration work.

Through these collaborations, the team promotes restoration efforts that honor the history, knowledge and ongoing presence of tribal nations — setting a model for inclusive and respectful land management.

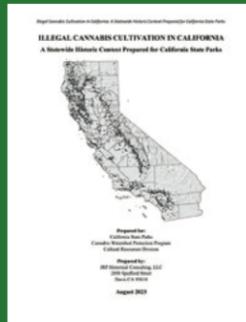
Program Highlights

155 grow sites reviewed by cultural staff

17 park units surveyed

9,665 acres surveyed

267 cultural resources recorded



The CWPP contracted with JRP Historical Consulting to develop a historic context of cannabis cultivation in California that provides a rich history and serves as a management tool for evaluating cannabis grows as cultural resources.

📍 Santa Cruz District

The CWPP Cultural Resources team has prioritized close collaboration with tribal partners, including the Amah Mutsun Land Trust in the Santa Cruz Mountains. These experiences have shaped a model for how to conduct a joint effort with interested Native American parties in archaeological survey methodology in an era of changing laws and attitudes governing cultural resources in California.



Stewarding Watersheds for Future Generations

Joining the CWPP in 2024, the Watershed Interpretation team works to connect Californians to the stories of their shared watersheds. In addition to the design and distribution of traditional public-facing education programs, videos and exhibits, the team works closely with districts to provide environmental interpretation training, enhance watershed-centered partnerships and support district interpretive projects through interdisciplinary project planning.

The team creatively weaves science, culture and storytelling to deepen public understanding and inspire watershed stewardship.

In 2025, the team launched internship programs resulting in the design of 10 exhibit panels through a partnership with scientific illustrators from CSU Monterey Bay and worked with recent graduate students and community leaders along the San Joaquin River to record a podcast exploring human relationships with California watersheds.

Dos Rios, Jedediah Smith Redwoods SP, Silverwood Lake SRA and Folsom Lake SRA

In 2025 the Watershed Interpretation team developed the Watersheds and Wildlife Across California PORTScast series in collaboration with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, reaching more than 2,000 students over the course of four interactive live-broadcast webinars. Spotighting presentations by 13 talented educators and scientists from both California State Parks and California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the series connected students to four unique watersheds in geographically and culturally distinct regions: the Sierra Foothills, the High Desert, the North Coast Rivers and the San Joaquin Valley.



Interpreters from California State Parks and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife broadcast live from Dos Rios.

Partnerships

All of this was made possible with significant support from and collaboration with the following:

California Governor's Office
California Natural Resources Agency
California Department of Cannabis Control
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California National Guard
State Water Resources Control Board
Department of Justice Eradication and Prevention of Illicit Cannabis
United Cannabis Enforcement Taskforce

American Conservation Experience
California Conservation Corps
Eastern Sierra Conservation Corps
Farmworkers Institute of Education and Leadership Development

Parks California
Save the Redwoods League
Trout Unlimited

Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District
Mendocino Resource Conservation District
San Mateo Resource Conservation District
Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County

*Front cover: Auburn State Recreation Area in Placer County.
Back cover: Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park in Humboldt County.
Photography: All images courtesy of California State Parks.*

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