



October 9, 2001

WILL ROGERS SHP:

SUMMARY OF REPORTS AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF ACTION

Over the last two months, as a result of concerns raised by private citizens and by our technical staff, we have carried out intensive investigations of resource and management issues at Will Rogers State Historic Park. The reports of those investigations are now available. They document a variety of conditions that are incompatible with proper stewardship of public resources. The majority of the adverse conditions are related to the current and past boarding of horses and other horse related activities.

The reports document that the Department in some cases has not met its legal obligations under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and its stewardship obligations toward historic resources. They demonstrate that projects to benefit the equestrian operation at times have been completed without meeting historic preservation standards or have not been in compliance with the General Plan; that boarded horses are impacting the stable and are contributing to erosion, sedimentation, and water quality impacts to Rustic Creek; and that these impacts are not being corrected. They show that the equestrian lessee has been unable to comply with important components of the lease, and that the Department has been unable to enforce compliance.

They document that the park has a long history of similar problems. And they point out that we have neither a fully detailed understanding of the park's landscape resources and the level of equestrian and other activities those resources will support, nor detailed standards from which to judge the best management of the resources or the interpretive value of different equestrian activities.

The Department, in this circumstance, must reassess its practices. It is our responsibility to stop the degradation of historical resources and the environment, and to restore compliance with the General Plan. To correct these deficiencies, we are initiating immediate changes and formally undertaking a new strategy for planned management.

In regard to equestrian use, the director has ordered the following:

- Temporary suspension of all formal equestrian activities and horse boarding within 90 days.
- Termination of the Equestrian Center lease once all boarded horses are removed from the park.

These actions will allow for a quantitative and qualitative documentation of the park's biotic resources and baseline water quality conditions and standards in the absence of livestock. This information will be crucial in completing the Historic Landscape Management Plan, and in developing an Equestrian Use Plan and an Interpretive Plan. This period will be used to begin restoration of historic structures and features where appropriate, re-vegetation of pastures to decrease sheet erosion, removal of dumped spoils from Sarah's Point, and removal or relocation of facilities not in conformance with the General Plan.

The General Plan has determined that an equestrian presence is essential to any realistic historical interpretation of Will Rogers and his operation of the ranch. We reiterate that perspective.

We also believe that the management of public resources should be based on preservation principles and on thorough and accurate information. The changes now being implemented are intended to accomplish these goals. Their ultimate purpose is an equestrian program compatible with historical and environmental protection, and a planning process in which both the Department and the public have access to the basic environmental information needed for productive decision making.

Investigations Undertaken

Several investigations document the compelling need for action. These are:

- An Audit Report of the one-year lease of the Equestrian Center conducted by the Department's Audits Section.
- A Resource and Management Issues Report compiled under the direction of the Department Historic Preservation Officer.
- A Review of Natural Resource Management Issues conducted by the Angeles District Resource Ecologist.
- A Draft Drainage Master Plan prepared by a private contractor.

Findings

- Location of horse boarding and construction of equestrian facilities in disregard of the General Plan.
- Damage to the stable and hay barn from lack of maintenance.
- Uncorrected erosion problems at Bone Canyon and Sarah's Point.
- Need to control run-off of pollutants into adjacent streams.
- Spoils dumping at Sarah's Point; effects uncorrected.
- Large pasture areas denuded by over-use; need for re-vegetation of pasture to reduce sheet erosion.
- Ground disturbance by horses encouraging invasive exotic plants.
- Equestrian facilities and other projects established or restored in disregard of CEQA procedures.

- Absence of information needed to establish carrying capacity for horses, or of standards to prevent degradation to cultural and natural resources.
- Absence of clearly defined standards for the role of horses in historic interpretation.
- Inability of the Equestrian Center lessee to be in substantial compliance with the terms of the lease.
- Inability of the District to enforce compliance with the lease and with the General Plan.

Schedule

The Department hopes by the end of this year to have developed a public advisory group to help draft plans for interpretation and equestrian use at the park, with final plans to be made available to the public next spring, followed by a formal public comment period under CEQA.