News Release

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Public Input Sought for New Plan

State Parks Announces Corrective Actions for Will Rogers Park

LOS ANGELES – With reports showing continuing environmental damage at Will Rogers State Historic Park, the California Department of Parks and Recreation is suspending overnight horse boarding while a new management plan for the park is developed.

The new plan will consider enhanced protection of the historical, cultural and natural resources of the park. New studies evaluating those resources have been completed and will be made available for public review and input. The Department of Parks and Recreation is currently developing a schedule for public hearings and other forms of public input during the process.

State Parks Director Rusty Areias ordered the suspension of private horse boarding at the park and termination of a privately run equestrian center at the park. The order does not apply to public trail riding at the park with horses brought in by trailer, nor to polo playing. Those activities will be allowed to continue.

This course of action is being taken to prevent any further environmental damage at the park while the new management plan is developed, as well as to ensure the safety of the horses while repair and restoration work is undertaken at the park.

There are about 45 privately owned horses now being boarded at Will Rogers State Historic Park. Park officials want the horses removed while they evaluate related damage, including pollution generated by the horses themselves. Through their waste, the horses generate roughly 4,500 pounds of nitrogen every year, 2,800 pounds of potassium and 765 pounds of phosphorous. Ecologists fear the chemicals are being carried by run-off into adjacent streams.

The boarding operation and the equestrian center contract will be suspended beginning in 90 days. California Department of Parks and Recreation personnel will assist in identifying potential new stables for the horses.

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With boarded horses off the property, biologists will begin a quantitative documentation of the park's biotic resources and baseline water quality conditions and standards, which will be crucial in completing a new management plan for the park. The period also will be used for restoration of historic structures, re-vegetation of pastures to decrease erosion and other important projects at the park. State Parks has allocated more than $2 million for these projects.

"We have tried very hard to accommodate the wishes of the horse owners, the environmental community, the park's visitors and members of the Rogers family who want the historic nature of this beautiful place maintained," said Areias. "But I feel it is now time to take a step back, suspend equestrian activities, and come up with a new operations plan for the park."

The action capped more than two decades of controversy at the park over the private boarding of horses. Last year Areias entered into a one-year contract with a horse boarding operation on a trial basis. A recent audit found continuing difficulties with keeping horses at the park.

"It's been more than 20 years since the first state audit warned of the difficulties in operating a state historic park and a horse boarding operation at the same time," Areais said. "The most recent reports confirm that those difficulties continue to this day."

Areias praised the horse owners and grooms for their dedication to the park in the past and promised to work with them in the future. "The existing General Plan for Will Rogers State Historic Park states that an equestrian presence is crucial to a realistic interpretation of the park, and State Parks agrees with that wholeheartedly," Areias said.

Will Rogers State Historic Park was established on the site of the ranch established by the late humorist Will Rogers, an avid horseman. The ranch property was a gift to the state in 1944 by members of the Rogers family. The 31-room ranch house includes 11 baths and seven fireplaces.

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