

# CLAM AND MOONSTONE BEACH COUNTY PARKS ACCESS MANAGEMENT MASTER PLAN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Humboldt County Department of Public Works*

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### **OVERVIEW**

The Humboldt County Department of Public Works has developed an Access Management Master Plan for Clam and Moonstone Beach County Parks to assist in managing the parks over the next ten years. The Master Plan establishes a framework for implementing measures that will provide for continued public access, use, and enjoyment of the parks while maintaining public safety and protecting sensitive resources.

The planning process began in 2002 when the Department of Public Works received a grant from the State Coastal Conservancy to prepare the Master Plan. At that time it was recognized that use of the parks had grown considerably, to the point of exceeding the carrying capacity of existing facilities and overwhelming the resources of the Parks Division for adequately maintaining the facilities. In addition, there was a growing public awareness of potential conflicts between different types of uses and potential impacts to sensitive natural and cultural resources within the parks.

Clam and Moonstone Beach County Parks have unique natural features which make them attractive for a variety of recreational activities. The parks provide access to large areas of flat, open space along the beach and are popular places for recreational activities such as beachcombing, clamming, fishing, surfing, hiking, picnicking, dog walking, horse riding, rock climbing, and wildlife viewing.

The parks are part of a dynamic coastal environment which includes beach waveslope (the area of sand washed by ocean waves during the last tidal cycle) and sand dunes (mounds and ridges of accumulated sand located above the mean high tide line). The area provides a range of habitat types which support wildlife and plant communities. However, many of the dune areas that once consisted of native dunegrass community types have become dominated by European beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*), a non-native invasive species. Some of the native plants and animals found within the park are legally protected under state or federal law, or are considered rare or endangered by the scientific community.

The Master Plan was developed based on public input and information gathered over four years. The public involvement process included five public meetings and consultation with a variety of stakeholder groups. The Yurok Tribe Environmental Program provided a summary

of cultural resources at the parks, and specialists were retained to conduct a biological survey, visitor use survey, and historical review.

The Master Plan contains an analysis of the key issues facing the parks and evaluates options for responding to these issues. The Master Plan's structure is designed to enable an adaptive management approach whereby the County can evaluate park conditions and the effectiveness of the existing management practices, and adapt the practices accordingly. Specific objectives of the plan include reducing user conflicts and congestion, improving the functionality of facilities, and minimizing impacts to natural and cultural resources. The Master Plan is consistent with the basic goals of the County Parks system, as defined in the Humboldt County General Plan, which are "to provide and adequately maintain park and recreation opportunities which are highly accessible and reflective of public needs; to protect park resources from incompatible uses; and to plan park development in such a manner as to minimize environmental impacts."

For Clam Beach County Park, the Master Plan analyzes seven management issues (dogs, vehicle driving on the beach, camping, campfires, western snowy plovers, sensitive plants, cultural and historical resources) and seven facility issues (access, parking areas, campground, restrooms, equestrian facilities, caretaker housing, day-use facilities). For Moonstone Beach County Park, the Master Plan analyzes four management issues (dogs, rock climbing, sensitive plants, cultural and historical resources) and three facility issues (access, parking areas, restrooms). The Master Plan also evaluates four management issues (staffing, law enforcement, signage, public outreach) which are common to both parks.

Development of the Master Plan is an important step in the ongoing process of managing the parks. The purpose of the plan is to provide information on the key issues facing the parks and to establish guidelines for making future decisions. The Master Plan is fundamentally a guidance document for the County Board of Supervisors, which has the ability to modify the elements of the Master Plan or consider alternatives which are not identified in the Master Plan. The Master Plan does not make binding decisions regarding projects or activities. Implementation of the Master Plan will occur in various phases by direction of the Board after the Master Plan is approved by the Board.

The costs for implementing activities that are primarily administrative would be covered by the regular County Parks budget. Measures that require more extensive effort such as permitting or developing new programs may require a supplemental budget from the County's General Fund or outside funding. The majority of the costs for restoration and facility development projects would be paid by outside funding sources such as the Coastal Conservancy and the 2002 Resources Bond Act ("Park Bond") program.

After presenting a series of options for management practices and facility improvements, the Master Plan identifies the options recommended for immediate implementation by the Public Works Department. The following sections outline some of the preferred options that were selected based on consistency with the goals of the County Parks system, level of need, public input, and cost-effectiveness.

## ***CLAM BEACH COUNTY PARK***

### ***Dogs***

The large waveslope area of Clam Beach County Park promotes separation between people and dogs. Under the existing ordinances, dogs are required to be under the complete control of their owners at all times. During the western snowy plover nesting season (March 1 through September 30), dogs must be leashed in all areas except on the waveslope and are not allowed in designated plover protection areas.

The primary issue with dogs at Clam Beach County Park is compliance with the existing ordinances. To reduce user conflicts and impacts to resources, the Public Works Department recommends enhancing public outreach and enforcement of the existing ordinances. In addition, to facilitate enforcement, the Department recommends modifying the ordinance to require owners to carry a leash at all times, and to put their dog on the leash if it is determined that the dog is not under complete control of the owner.

### ***Vehicle Driving on the Beach***

The current park ordinances allow street-licensed, four-wheel-drive vehicles to access the waveslope through the south parking lot from sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset, except during specified summer holiday weekends. The maximum speed is 15 miles per hour. Vehicle play and driving in the dunes or restricted areas is prohibited. The gate at the vehicle access point is open during periods when driving is permitted and closed otherwise.

Most visitors who drive on the beach obey the park ordinances. However, vehicle use regulations are frequently violated by some individuals, creating a significant concern for public safety, user conflicts, and resource impacts. Based on the continued pattern of incidents associated with vehicles on the beach, the Public Works Department recommends new limitations on vehicle access which include locking the gate at the vehicle access point from March 1 through September 30, and developing a permit program which would authorize permit holders to open the gate for their vehicles during this period.

The permit program would facilitate enforcement of the driving regulations, and seasonal gate closure would increase compliance with the driving regulations during the period when visitor use is the highest and western snowy plovers are most sensitive to disturbance. During the rest of the year, a permit would not be required and the gate would normally be open during the day. The existing regulations governing vehicle use on the beach would not change.

Under the proposed permit program, General Permits would be issued to commercial fishermen, clammers, disabled persons, and senior citizens. In addition, Special Use Permits would be issued at the discretion of the Public Works Department if applicants demonstrate a reasonable need for such a permit and the proposed vehicular use would be conducted in a manner and location that will not result in an adverse impact to coastal resources. Special Use Permits would not be issued for recreational driving, but would be issued for exceptional instances where a proposed activity is dependent on the use of a vehicle. The list of permit holders and vehicles would be forwarded to the Sheriff's Office and County Parks staff.

The gate would be locked either by a padlock or cardlock system. Permit recipients would receive a padlock key or access card with their permit, and would be charged a fee to cover the costs of issuing the permit and maintaining the locking device. During seasonal low tides, the permit requirement would be waived for all clambers with recreational fishing licenses and clamming gear.

### ***Campground***

The Public Works Department recommends continuing to operate a campground, and addressing the identified issues by making facility improvements and creating a new park caretaker position.

### ***Western Snowy Plover***

Clam Beach County Park is a breeding site for the Pacific coast population of the western snowy plover, which was listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1993 (the listing was reaffirmed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in April 2006). Plovers are attracted to areas with open beach and sparsely vegetated sandy dunes, and Clam Beach provides habitat which has been identified as critical for the survival and recovery of the species.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the decrease in active nesting areas and the decline in breeding population of western snowy plovers have been a result of habitat degradation associated primarily with invasive, non-native plants, disturbance from humans and dogs during the breeding season, and expanding predator populations.

Following the release of the draft recover plan for the western snowy plover in 2001 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the County and other organizations moved quickly to implement protective measures on County Parks. Protection activities included monitoring, installation of seasonal symbolic fencing and predator exclosures, seasonal closure of protection areas, informational signage, public outreach, and enhanced law enforcement.

The Public Works Department recommends continuing with the existing measures for protection and recovery of the western snowy plover, expanding some measures, and implementing certain additional measures. The measures to be expanded or added include habitat restoration, new regulations for dogs and vehicle driving, increased enforcement, improved signage, and predator control.

### ***Sensitive Plant Species***

The Public Works Department recommends performing habitat restoration to support the protection of sensitive plant species. Restoration would also help prevent the park from serving as a source area for the migration of exotic invasive species onto nearby properties.

### ***Cultural and Historical Resources***

The Public Works Department recommends supporting traditional use by tribal members, and consulting with the Wiyot tribal government on resource management, interpretive signage, and redevelopment and restoration projects.

### ***Redevelopment and Restoration Projects***

The Public Works Department recommends the following projects for the first phase of redevelopment and restoration:

- A joint project with the California Department of Parks and Recreation in the adjacent areas of Clam Beach County Park and Little River State Beach that would include the following:
  - Improving drainage at the north parking lot.
  - Installing a floating (removable) boardwalk between the north parking lot and the high tide line to provide access for people with disabilities.
  - New and updated signs to provide interpretive and informational material.
  - Restoring the nearshore dunes between the north and south parking lots by removing European beachgrass, re-shaping the nearshore dunes to resemble their natural topography, and re-planting with native plant species.
  - Extending the Hammond Coastal Trail along the west side of Clam Beach Drive.
  
- An integrated redevelopment and restoration project at the south parking lot that would include:
  - Providing a formal park entrance and traffic calming measures.
  - Re-designing the day-use parking area and vehicle access point.
  - Upgrading the campground by providing more formal camp sites and constructing a new restroom.
  - Improving pedestrian trails and restoring riparian areas.
  - Expanding the equestrian parking area and developing a designated horse rolling area.
  
- Development of a site for employee housing at a parcel on the east side of Highway 101. The site would have a concrete slab and utilities for an employee-provided trailer or manufactured home.

## ***MOONSTONE BEACH COUNTY PARK***

### ***Dogs***

Moonstone Beach County Park occupies a relatively small area and is subject to periods of high use on sunny days and weekends. These conditions create the potential for user conflicts due to the large number of dogs and people in close proximity. Dogs are currently allowed to be unleashed outside the parking area if they are under the complete control of their owners. To reduce user conflicts, the Public Works Department recommends continuing to allow dogs to be unleashed on the waveslope, but requiring dogs to be kept on leashes above the waveslope. The Department recommends an initiative to consult with local dog users on developing an effective outreach program and providing clear information to the public on the location of the edge of the waveslope.

### ***Rock Climbing***

Rock climbing is currently an unregulated activity at county parks. Rock outcrops within the Moonstone Beach area have ceremonial and spiritual significance to the Yurok Tribe, which is opposed to rock climbing for other than cultural or ceremonial purposes. The Public Works Department recommends further consultation with the Yurok Tribe and local rock climbing organizations regarding the use of permanently fixed anchor bolts before identifying a preferred option.

### ***Cultural and Historical Resources***

The Public Works Department recommends supporting traditional use by tribal members, taking measures to ensure protection of cultural artifacts within the park, and consulting with the Yurok tribal government on interpretive signage and redevelopment and restoration projects.

### ***Redevelopment and Restoration Projects***

The parking area at Moonstone Beach is small and frequently reaches capacity. The adjacent parking area managed by the Humboldt North Coast Land Trust has been damaged by erosion and requires immediate maintenance. The Public Works Department recommends implementing a project in coordination with the Humboldt North Coast Land Trust and the adjacent private property owner that would include improvements to the entire lower parking area and construction of rock slope protection to protect the parking area from future wave action. In addition, the portable restroom should be replaced with a permanent vault restroom.

## ***CLAM AND MOONSTONE BEACH COUNTY PARKS***

### ***County Parks Staff***

The level of staffing within the Parks Division has not increased since 1980, while the level of use at the County Parks, especially at the coastal parks, has increased substantially. Park staff currently struggle to provide the minimum services required at Clam and Moonstone Beach County Parks and have little or no time for other activities beyond basic park maintenance and campground fee collection.

Based on the potential for public safety concerns, user conflicts, and impacts to park resources, there is a clear need for increasing the presence of parks staff. The Public Works Department recommends establishing a full-time permanent park caretaker position for operation and maintenance of these two parks. A permanent caretaker would be able to maintain a more continual watch over the parks, respond quickly to incidents, and initiate proactive activities such as educational outreach and plover protection measures.

### ***Enforcement***

A law enforcement presence at Clam and Moonstone Beaches has proven necessary for public safety and protection of park resources. The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office holds primary jurisdiction for law enforcement at the county parks. The Sheriff's Office staff includes a Beach Deputy who is specifically assigned for law enforcement at the County's beaches and dunes. The Beach Deputy position was historically funded from the State Off-Highway

Vehicle (OHV) Grant, but funding levels have recently been reduced, and this position is in jeopardy of being reduced or terminated. The Public Works Department recommends encouraging the Sheriff's Office to continue to fund the Beach Deputy position in the event that the OHV grant or other grant funds are not available, and to pursue cooperative enforcement opportunities with other entities.

County Parks staff are currently authorized to issue tickets for violations associated with vehicles, but cannot issue tickets directly to individuals for non-vehicle related offenses. The Public Works Department recommends authorizing one or more members of County Parks staff to issue citations for misdemeanor violations of state law and infractions of County park ordinances. If a permanent park caretaker is hired, the person hired for this position should have full citation-writing authority for misdemeanors and infractions. In addition, at least one staff person should be trained so he or she can serve as backup when the permanent caretaker is off duty.

### ***Signage***

The existing park signs have been designed and installed over time, and there is a need for establishing consistency, minimizing visual impacts, and updating the interpretive and regulatory information. The Public Works Department recommends developing a signage program for coastal County parks that would establish basic standards and protocols. As part of the signage program, the existing park signs would be replaced with new signs developed in accordance with the new standards.

### ***Outreach***

The Public Works Department recommends enhancing coordination with local organizations which provide public outreach and resource protection programs. Part of the outreach efforts would include providing better information to the public on the location of the edge of the waveslope and the presence of sensitive areas.