

MARIN CONSERVATION LEAGUE

Joint Meeting: Parks and Open Space and Land Use/Transportation Committees January 9, 2013

FINAL MINUTES

ATTENDEES: Nona Dennis, Chair; Larry Minikes, Tom Boss, Susan Stompe, Jill Templeton, Bob Johnston, Vicki Nichols, Priscilla Bull, Jana Haehl, Randy Greenberg, Ann Thomas, Periann Wood, Doug Wilson; Cicely Muldoon, Brannon Ketcham, David Press, and Melanie, NPS; Liza Crosse, Sup. Kinsey's office; Scott Alonso, Assemblymember Marc Levine's Office; Mike Swezy, MMWD; James Raives and Carl Somers, Marin County Parks; Greg Zitney and Rafael Durr, Marin County Parks and Open space commission; Burr Heneman, representing Rep. Jared Huffman; Stephanie Larson, UC Co-op, Sonoma County; Kevin Lunny, Ted Mclsaac, Nichola Spaletta, Rich Grossi, Jackie Grossi, Pt. Reyes Seashore Ranchers Association; and Gordon Bennett, Save Our Seashore.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND AGENDA ADDITIONS: 1) Marin County Parks and Open Space Commission meeting, Jan. 23, 2:30, Planning Commission chambers. Agenda changed, placing Pt. Reyes National Seashore Planning and Elk Issues first on the agenda.

MINUTES for December 12, 2013 – Approved

INFORMATION AND DISCUSSION ITEMS:

1. Pt. Reyes National Seashore – Ranch Plan and Elk in the Pastoral Zone: In response to growing concerns over the economic impact of free-roaming elk competing with local livestock for scarce forage and water on ranches in the pastoral zone of Pt. Reyes National Seashore, and the need for both long-term and short-term solutions, MCL held a joint meeting of the Parks and Open Space and Land Use and Transportation Committees on January 9. NPS personnel were asked to present a two-year Ranch Planning process which is about to get underway, and describe measures they are taking to deal with the elk in the short-term. About 30 people attended, including representatives from the Pt. Reyes Seashore Ranchers Association, Supervisor Kinsey's staff, Assemblymember Marc Levine's staff, and others. By way of background, a two-part article from the West Marin Citizen was circulated along with the January 9 agenda.

Ranch Plan Process. Cicely Muldoon, PRNS Superintendent, began by outlining the first of two topics: the upcoming Ranch Plan process (the second topic, below, concerns short-term management of the free-roaming elk in the Pastoral Zone). The Sec. of the Interior has authorized 20-year ranch permits and NPS has secured funding to begin a two-year planning process. NPS is holding several pre-scoping meetings before launching the required Environmental Assessment (EA). (Staff believes that a full EIS is not required.) A consultant will be under contract shortly. Within roughly 4 to 6 weeks NPS will hold official scoping for the EA. In addition to long-term management decisions for the free-roaming elk, the Ranch Plan will cover twenty-year leases, crop diversification, speed of individual permits, use of herbicides, operational flexibility, sustainability and organic certification, for which the ranches are well-known. The NPS is not going to update the 1980 General Management Plan. Superintendent Muldoon stated that it would be too time-consuming. In its present form, it continues to

provide an adequate framework to ensure that historic ranches remain a permanent part of the PRNS pastoral zone. As the Plan moves forward, NPS will continue to extend individual permits with letters of authorization, she said.

Free-roaming tule elk in Pastoral Zone. NPS Wildlife Biologist David Press provided background to the current issue of elk roaming on ranches in the Pastoral Zone and competing with livestock for forage and water and doing other damage. Formerly native tule elk were reintroduced to a 17,000-acre confined area in the Tomales Point Wilderness in 1978. In 1998, under terms of a Tule Elk Management Plan and EA, 45 elk were moved to the Limantour Estero Wilderness area to establish a free-roaming herd. Several elk moved out of the unfenced wilderness area, and currently about 74 animals are roaming on ranches in the pastoral zone of the Park. According to Press, NPS staff first noted the elk in 2009 and began visual surveys and added GPS collars to track several individuals, receiving intensive data points every 3 hours. Some 11,000 data points have been collected, revealing seasonal and diurnal patterns.

NPS staff has taken a number of steps to deal with the problem in the short term and will continue these in 2014:

- Experimental fencing, including electrical fencing, increasing height to 8 feet
- Assisting individual ranchers (mentions C Ranch in particular) with fence repairs, plugging holes, exclosing areas of ranch from elk,
- Hazing animals to guide elk away from C Ranch to non-grazing areas across the road – with limited success last year, improving this year
- Working with CDF&W elk experts and studying management of other elk preserves around the state
- Developing water features, where animals tend to congregate
- Opening up other areas of open pastures
- Relocating some back into Limantour Wilderness Area
- Rounding up problem animals

The estimated capacity of Limantour herds has not reached 250 – 350 animals considered reasonable in 1998 Plan – with 75 in Drakes Beach area and 80 south of Coast Camp. Various population control methods have been tested, and all options are open; none are simple. Birth control is labor-intensive and costly. Tomales Pt. herd appears to be currently self-regulating in numbers, which vary from year to year.

Issues requiring longer term solutions, not covered by 1998 Plan and EA, that would be addressed, along with other issues, in the upcoming Ranch Plan:

- Johnes Disease – Free-roaming individuals were tested and quarantined for 6 months before moving to Limantour Wilderness; testing can produce false results, but the Limantour herds are considered to be disease-free; must follow protocols to ensure any elk that might be relocated elsewhere in the State are disease-free.
- Relocation to other preserves in the State – must consider safety of both staff and animals --mortality rate of animals; helicopters are dangerous – not covered in 1998 Plan, which did not anticipate that elk would move into pastoral zone. The Plan did consider possibility of animals roaming east across highway 1 onto private lands. That hasn't happened, except for one bull, which was put down.

Questions and Discussion: Is it a given that there will be elk in the pastoral zone. Response (from 1998 Plan): Not anticipated specifically in the Plan, although permits in pastoral zone include management for a wide variety of “wildlife” as well as livestock operations, and elk qualify as native wildlife.

Brannon Ketcham: The planning process (for 20-year permits) will provide the larger framework for long term solutions for the elk. NPS is committed to continuing historic ranching and dairy farming in the pastoral zone, as authorized in the PRNS enabling legislation.

Kevin Lunny: Ranchers believe that parts of 1998 Plan provide management tools that could be used now to deal with animals in the pastoral zone – ranchers are worried and fearful about starting new planning process and “going backward” to place greater focus on the tule elk. Wants to see active management of the elk now. Does not want to set aside the existing Plan. Response from NPS is that the 1998 Plan does not give NPS authority to manage issues that were not in the Plan.

Gordon Bennett: Environmental organizations are not looking for removal of ranching; they support ranching in the pastoral zone. Sees the issue not as “if” ranching is to continue, but “how” it will do so.

Priscilla Bull: Concerned about need and urgency of solutions for water, fencing, dealing with Johnes disease.

Susan Stompe: What is CDF&W role, as outlined in the MOU? There are elk-cattle interactions all over the state. Does CDF&W have any authority or responsibility for elk on PRNS? NPS response: the MOU was for 5 years only. NPS makes good use of State expertise, however, and cooperates fully.

Nichola Spaletta: Ranchers can’t support growing costs of maintaining herds, with competition for water and forage; 5 ranches are affected, 5 near Home Ranch. Herd is growing at rate of 12 ½ %/year. Public needs to know what the situation is for ranchers who can’t afford to purchase water and organic feed. Tim McIsaac: Needs positive results; doesn’t want NPS to study to death. Supt Muldoon said the Park expects to continue good collaboration with ranchers during the planning process.

Other comments: Rep. Huffman’s, Assemblymember Levine’s and Supervisor Kinsey’s staff are all following closely, meeting with ranchers and NPS staff. They all understand the need for short-term measures during the planning process. Levine will look into status of MOU with the State.

Jana Haehl: Believes that ranchers need solutions in short-term. What would make ranchers “happy” – relocating elk elsewhere?

Conclusions: Useful to bring all parties together to discuss. Consensus: before taking further action, let the NPS planning process begin with announced public meeting (in 4 to 6 weeks). Then consider possibility of other group forums.

2. Marin Parks and Open Space District – Road and Trail Management Plan and Draft TPEIR: The Parks Department has received more than 200 letters on the RTMP, the majority on the merits of the Plan, and not on the Draft EIR as requested. Many complain about restrictions in Visitor Use Management Zones 1 and 2 (e.g., on Giacomini and Cascade Canyon OSPs). The distinction between Visitor Management Zones is not clear, nor is the distinction between “system” trails and “social” trails clear; people want to continue walking on familiar (old) trails. Other complaints include desire for more bicycle access to paths, and walking dogs off leash on all fire roads, including Zone 1. Although the process of developing the RTMP was widely publicized, the general public has not been aware of the Plan or its effect in popular and nearby preserves.

James Raives explained that the Parks Department has gone through the letters and is making some revisions to the RTMP. These generally focus on the Visitor Use Management Zones, which will collapse Zones 2 and 3 and be renamed “Areas” or similar. The boundaries will be “softened” based on habitat sensitivity (more restrictions), and proximity to developed communities (fewer restrictions). Walkers will be “encouraged” to stay on designated trails. Others (bikers, equestrians, dog-walkers) will be prohibited from trails not designated for their use. Some policies developed for the Plan will be amended. Policies specific to Use Management Zones will be eliminated. Revisions will be posted on the County web site January 16 and will be reviewed before the commission at the January 23 meeting. MCL submitted comments on the Draft EIR and will submit comments on the RTMP, generally supportive of efforts to develop the Plan, but with some specific points of criticism, such as absence of trail safety design standards.

3. Trail Safety Campaign: Nona reported on the progress of representatives from Marin Horse Council, MCBC, and MCL (“Trail Partners”) who are taking preliminary steps to fund a PR campaign to improve culture and behaviors on public lands roads and trails. The group is calling itself “Trail Partners” and is seeking funds to enable working with the County’s consultant to design the campaign. A draft MOU will serve as a basis for working together, which will be reviewed by the MCL board.
4. Marin State Parks Updates: No updates from the Marin State Parks Association were presented; however, Tom announced that the Association will hold a meeting at Olompali on January 21 at 7:00. The State Parks Forward Commission met on December 18 in Sacramento. A consultant will synthesize input from regional workshops around the State and focus groups and draft the Commission’s report for public review. The Commission will then hold a meeting in February. MCL will review the report and send comments before that meeting. Information will be posted on the Parks Forward web site.
5. Muir Woods Nat’l Monument is studying two projects to help resolve severe traffic, parking, and congestion problems. We reported on the December 9 meeting convened by Supervisors Kinsey and Sears. The NPS extended to January 11 the comment period on alternatives to be considered in an Environmental Assessment. Nona will draft a letter for MCL to submit before the deadline.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:30 p.m. The next meeting is February 13, 2014

Minutes by Nona Dennis

