

## Nearly all expansion of state parks halted

### COSTS OF OPERATING MORE LAND CITED

San Jose Mercury News, Oct. 08, 2004, by Paul Rogers

The Schwarzenegger administration has quietly shut down virtually all expansion of California's state parks -- even land paid for with private donations, the Mercury News has learned.

Saying the state cannot afford new rangers, fences, signs and maintenance, Schwarzenegger officials in the state Department of Finance are refusing to buy almost any new land or accept new scenic beaches, forests and historic sites into public ownership.

The policy was put into place by the state Public Works Board, an obscure panel appointed by the governor that approves funding for state buildings, college classrooms, prisons, parks and other facilities.

In March, Deputy Finance Director Mike Genest, who was chairing the meeting that month, said additions of state parkland requiring any new operating costs would be rejected by the board.

The policy shift has stunned the state Parks Department and environmental groups, who note that California voters in the past four years have approved \$10.1 billion in new parks and water bonds to preserve scenic land and wildlife. They say no California governor, even during the Great Depression, has shut off additions to the state's nationally renowned parks system.

Schwarzenegger officials say the slowdown is needed because of the state's ongoing budget problems.

"The action isn't a commentary on the wisdom of purchasing land, the issue is the cost to the state to maintain it," said H.D. Palmer, a spokesman for the state Department of Finance.

Environmentalists and land trust leaders say that the board continues to buy land and buildings for other uses, such as college campuses and courthouses, and that with the state's population growing by roughly 600,000 people a year, wild places not saved now will be paved later.

"This is very significant. It is contrary to the wishes of the voters," said Fred Keeley, a former Santa Cruz assemblyman who helped write several recent parks bond measures. "They haven't stopped acquiring lands for new prisons or DMV offices. Somehow they have singled out state parks for special punishment."

So far in 2004, the Public Works Board has approved acquiring 4,075 acres of land for state parks, most in small pieces adjacent to existing parks. In 2003 and 2002, by comparison, the board acquired a total of 62,969 acres.

In recent months, a number of key acquisitions have been stalled or their supporters have been told by state parks officials that the properties are unlikely to be accepted. They include:

- Pigeon Point: 70 acres of oceanfront land sits along the San Mateo County coast near Pigeon Point Lighthouse. With tide pools and a mile of beaches, the land was appraised at \$8 million. The non-profit Peninsula Open Space Trust, based in Menlo Park, raised \$3 million toward the purchase, and had \$5 million approved in state parks bond funds in the 2001-2002 state budget. The trust removed a

partially built boutique hotel, replanted native vegetation and has been trying without success to transfer the property to state parks to add to adjacent state parkland.

- San Lorenzo River Redwoods. Located in the Santa Cruz Mountains north of Boulder Creek, this 1,069-acre property has long been looked at by state parks officials as a way to expand Castle Rock State Park. The Sempervirens Fund, a non-profit based in Los Altos, paid \$10.8 million for the land. Under the deal, the state was to reimburse half of the purchase cost.

Several weeks ago, the Public Works Board's staff recommended that the board reject the acquisition after state parks officials said they would need six new employees to maintain it. After inquiries from the Mercury News and pressure from state Sen. Byron Sher, D-San Jose, the staff will urge the board at its meeting today to accept the land but keep it off limits to the public unless Sempervirens Fund operates tours.

- Coast Dairies. This stunning 7,000-acre property includes seven miles of beaches and bluffs on the Santa Cruz County coast south of Davenport. After a Las Vegas developer attempted to build 139 luxury homes there, the Trust for Public Land purchased it in 1998 using \$42 million in donations from the Packard Foundation and other private donors. The trust is attempting to transfer its 400 acres of beaches to state parks, but parks officials have said the acquisition faces trouble at the Public Works Board.

If land trusts are left holding the properties, Keeley said, it could threaten their financial viability.

Karen Finn, administrative secretary for the Public Works Board, said that many of these land deals were made when budget conditions were better, and with a different governor. She said the board still would accept new parkland if private groups paid for docents, rangers and other operating costs.

The ongoing deal to preserve Hearst Ranch is not likely to be affected, she said.

“If the Public Works Board decides not to move forward with the acquisition of land which the voters have approved for decades and decades, it will be the first time that an administration has stopped the protection of our natural resources like that,” said Rachel Dinno, government affairs director for the Trust for Public Land.

At the height of the Depression, from 1929 through 1933, Republican governors C.C. Young and Jim Rolph used bond funds to purchase Seacliff and Sunset beaches in Santa Cruz County; 520 acres at Mount Tamalpais in Marin County; 900 acres of Mount Diablo in Contra Costa County; Point Lobos State Reserve near Big Sur; and Rubicon Point at Lake Tahoe.

State Parks Director Ruth Coleman said the solution may be for state leaders and private officials to come up with some kind of endowment to help cover the costs of rangers and other park costs because bond money can only be used to buy land, not hire staff.

“It's not that they are telling us you can't buy land, but they are saying you have to show how to manage it without new resources,” she said. “The burden is on us to partner with private groups to figure out a way through.”

But that is asking a lot after private groups already paid for most or all of the new parkland, said Audrey Rust, president of the Peninsula Open Space Trust.

“That's ridiculous,” she said. “These are public parks. Public money should be paying for the rangers' salaries.”