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October 11, 2013

Christine Kehoe
Lance Conn
Co-chairs
Parks Forward Commission
1416 9th Street, Room 1414
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Co-chairs Kehoe and Conn:

Thank you and the other members of the Parks Forward Commission for accepting the important challenge of creating a new vision and long-term plan for financial sustainability of the State Parks system. Sierra Club's founder, John Muir, was an early advocate of state and national parks. For more than 120 years, our organization has worked hand-in-hand with various parks systems around the country to ensure that current and future generations have the opportunity to benefit from those systems. We look forward to working with you as you fulfill the Commission's mission.

With this letter, we offer a few key principles we believe should guide the state park system's operations in the future, and that we hope can be part of the vision you develop. These principles are founded on our belief that the California State Parks is one of California's most valuable and important assets. The agency contains the largest and most diverse natural and cultural heritage holdings of any state agency in the nation. It protects and preserves more than 1.6 million acres of our state, including redwood forests, beautiful desert, mountain ranges, and more than 280 miles of our coastal beaches, wetlands, estuaries, and dune systems. These precious ecosystems must be properly managed and protected to preserve their natural values. They provide clean air and water, wildlife habitat, protection for endangered species, and open space as well as recreational opportunities.

The state parks system also is a powerful economic engine accounting for upwards of \$6 billion annual economic activity. Money spent on operating and maintaining State Parks is a wise investment. Previous studies have shown that for every one dollar spent from the General Fund on State Parks the same General Fund sees \$2.35 in returned tax revenues. Recent budget decisions seriously undermine the traditional economic engine State Parks represent, impacting local economies and small businesses the most.

Hence, we arrive at the following principles to guide California State Parks operations in the future:

- **Protect and manage the ecosystem.** The park system holds more than a million acres of natural areas that provide increasingly important habitat and ecosystem services. Because much of this land is essentially wilderness, it can suffer from an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" approach when the park system is grappling with where to focus maintenance and management attention and funding. Yet these lands require skilled management to avoid such things as invasive species damage or dramatic alteration of wildlife habitat. The system needs to establish and follow rigorous standards for protecting and managing these natural lands.
- **Keep the parks open.** All of the 280 park units, parks, reserves, recreation areas, beaches, and historic parks must be kept open. They are all irreplaceable assets and used by

Californians and visitors alike. The state population is growing, and we need all our parks. Closing parks costs the state money; when Providence Mountains State Park was closed, it was vandalized, and more expense was incurred when it was reopened. Closing parks also means fewer visitors and thus less revenue generation. And closing parks deprives Californians of the cultural and recreational benefits of the system.

- **Expand the system.** California's population has grown to more than 37 million and is expected to reach 50 million by 2050. The state parks system must expand to continue to adequately serve the growing population, including in and near urban and suburban centers now under served.
- **Repair and maintain parks facilities.** Public facilities wear out over time and require replacement or significant restoration. Faced with inadequate funds, State Parks staff members have extended facility life with a “band-aid” approach. This deferred maintenance has now accrued a backlog of approximately \$1.3 billion. These patched facilities are nearing the crisis point of total failure and threaten to close significant portions of the park system if not proactively addressed. A funding mechanism must be found to pay for this deferred maintenance. One method could be a state bond measure with the funds dedicated to deferred maintenance.
- **Keep the parks accessible to all Californians.** The State Parks must be kept financially affordable to all, including those with limited incomes. Entrance and camping fees should be set in a way that does not deter visitors or preclude many residents from enjoying the parks. A lower fee for limited income visitors should be considered.
- **Establish long-term, dedicated funding.** The State Parks must be allocated an adequate stable source of funding that does not depend on legislative appropriations from the General Fund every year. Possible sources include an extraction tax on oil and gas production, a vehicle tax with free access to Californians, or an addition to the fuel tax. Parks Forward should examine what funding sources are used in other states that can be adapted to California.
- **Partnerships must serve the parks first.** Partnerships with local non-profit public and private entities may benefit State Parks. The agreements must be carefully controlled to provide that the Park values and amenities are maintained for all visitors. Partnerships have worked well in the context of partnerships with local park districts, such as East Bay Regional Parks, and with local parks support entities, which provide either funding or some management. However, partnerships with private for-profit entities to manage parks are not appropriate. The goals of for-profit entities are incompatible with the goals essential to appropriate and effect park management and stewardship. If there is a profit to be made from park management, it should inure to its owner the State, not to private entities.
- **Establish rigorous practices regarding concessions agreements and management.** Concessions can provide important services in State Parks. However, attention must be paid to critical strategic sourcing practices. These become increasingly important as the scope of a concessionaire is broadened to include areas formerly reserved only for trained State Parks staff. There are risks in removal of a state park activity from public control with the resultant problem that the park’s operation may become solely profit oriented and inconsistent with serving the public and protecting the resource. A few areas of concern and related recommendations are listed here:
 - Project mission statements and results to be achieved by the concessionaire must encompass not only financial results but features which reflect the mission of State

Parks which includes preserving the State's natural and cultural resources and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

- Supplier selection must be handled carefully. There must be detailed evaluation of potential suppliers including benchmarking against suppliers who have proven capabilities for these types of services.
 - State Parks will need to provide very clear Statements of Work for any concession contracts and have strong contract management capabilities in order to expertly negotiate contracts so that they are consistent with the public interest, properly monitor contract fulfillment, and enforce the contract terms.
 - Rather than relying on infrequent and narrow-scoped outside audits of contract performance, State Parks should initiate its own system for tracking contract fulfillment and compliance on an annual basis.
- **Limit ORV Parks.** No new ORV parks should be created and existing ORV parks should not be expanded. Opening park land to ORVs creates severe unavoidable and unacceptable environmental damage to the resource, including large-scale destruction of vegetation and habitat, air pollution, CO2 discharge, and other detrimental environmental effects. ORV use basically makes the land unusable by any other user and by most wildlife and is contrary to basic purposes of state parks to serve the public and protect the resource.

Again, thank you for your service and for the opportunity to contribute to your tremendous effort to develop a new vision and funding for our state parks.

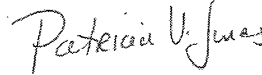
Sincerely,



Kathryn Phillips
Director
Sierra Club California



Alan Carlton
Co-Chair
Sierra Club California Parks Committee



Patricia Jones
Co-Chair