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To: California State Parks Big Basin Reimagining Planning Team

Subject: California State Park Rangers Association (CSPRA) comments

Attached are our comments and input for consideration in the Big Basin Redwoods State Park Re-imagining effort. They are a compilation of recommendations based on input from active and retired CSPRA members, park professionals with extensive knowledge of operations relative to California State Parks in general and Big Basin in particular. We also solicited input from respected scientists outside of the department including cultural heritage specialists and historians.

CSPRA applauds the diligent outreach that has occurred to date in the Reimagining Big Basin effort. Our comments relate to aspects of these worthy “Guiding Principles” (paraphrased here):

- “Land management practices” guided by natural ecological processes, indigenous practices and informed by current science;
- “Aesthetic, Reverent Design,” where Big Basin’s natural character will be the chief informant of design decisions and the historic architectural character will be honored, yet resilience and sustainability will be paramount to celebrate Big Basin as the iconic first California State Park;
- “Leadership in Resilient Park Planning” that embraces stewardship with humility and flexibility. emphasizes the forest lifecycle and ongoing resource management and represents the State of California’s leadership in planning in the face of climate challenges.
- “Visitor Experience” with facilities and high-use areas located away from sensitive resources and sited to facilitate sustainable forest stewardship and protect opportunities for evocative nature experiences.

I thank you for your serious consideration of our recommendations.

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Comments to the Reimagining Big Basin team from the California State Park Rangers Association (CSPRA)

The following points represent CSPRA's recommendations as input to the Big Basin reimagining effort. All of the recommendations and plans depend on adequate park staffing. Operational staffing levels were woefully deficient prior to the 2020 fire. These restoration efforts will take increased human resources, or reimagining Big Basin will fail. Needs include virtually every operational classification. CSPRA recommends a special appropriation in the Budget Bill to increase permanent and limited-term staffing levels. We recognize the barriers and hurdles control agencies might pose, but current and future budget projections should allow for these challenges.

LAND MANAGEMENT

In addition to "natural ecological processes, indigenous practices and current science," the Big Basin Redwoods State Park General Plan should serve as a guide. The General Plan highlights issues that were apparent prior to the 2020 incident where major use areas and visitor contact points had been placed in prime redwood grove areas. Much thought and public input went into the plan that remains relevant and vital.

The principles applied here for land management appropriately call for scientific monitoring of ecological impacts and indigenous practices, and should consider all of the park's native species and habitats. For example, fires that are too frequent would eliminate obligate seeding species, such as the Santa Cruz cypress. Pre- and post-fire fine-scale vegetation mapping that soon will be available for the Santa Cruz Mountains should reveal fuel and vegetation patterns before the fire, and help determine discernable differences in fire behavior across geographic and topographic diversity.

With the changes brought to the old-growth redwood forest by the massive fire event, new interpretive messaging should focus not simply on relevant fire ecology messages, but also the causes of such catastrophic fires; how redwoods react to them; and how land managers can best respond. The causes of these conflagrations present challenges that only a scientific-based approach will help to identify. Past practices may or may not be relevant in today's environment. It is here that the State of California's leadership of resilience in the face of climate challenges can best be expressed.

The felling of trees during the fire, the burning away of redwood and tan oak tree canopies, and the removal of hazardous trees have opened much of the forest to the sky and sunlight. Invasive herbs, grasses, and other annual "weeds" can provide easily ignited flash fuels when they dry out. First and foremost, this is a biodiversity issue and, secondarily a fuels issue. Funding needs to be provided to manage this ongoing threat.

"Native plants are key to conserving vanishing biodiversity" – National Wildlife Federation. Prior to any re-establishment efforts, a mapping effort should take place to identify areas where restoration might be valuable versus those areas where natural regeneration is already occurring. Even severe fire is part of the natural process, and in a natural area we would only encourage intervention where there is a need to accelerate the recovery process (e.g., there are severe erosion threats or other immediate needs to restore certain species/habitats). To provide suitable plants for vegetation restoration, a native plant nursery might be established in or near the park. The local Bioregional Council has member expertise in this area. Volunteers could help with the re-establishment of native vegetation in disturbed areas. The Mountain Parks Foundation, Sempervirens Fund, trails associations, bird clubs, and other organizations, could assist with recruitment and provide funds for supervision of volunteers.

The nest of the marbled murrelet was first found in Big Basin. According to Steven Singer, an expert on the marbled murrelet in the Santa Cruz Mountains, the 2020 fire destroyed about 50% of all the potentially suitable murrelet nest trees in the park. The remaining suitable trees are concentrated in the few small locations where there was no crown fire. These locations should be mapped, as artifacts of what the pre-fire park looked like. While focusing on the murrelet, the remaining islands of relatively undisturbed vegetation should be protected from disturbance for all the species that rely on them.

DESIGN and the VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Facilities and high-use areas must be located away from sensitive resources and sited to facilitate sustainable forest stewardship and protect opportunities for evocative nature experiences. In that context, honoring and preserving historic architectural character and celebrating Big Basin SP as the iconic first California State Park, presents a dilemma. We suggest that the historic headquarters building constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) be re-built as it was prior to the fire. It would be ideal, in terms of honoring history, to rebuild on the building's original footprint, but the impacts of humans at that location must change in that prime redwood grove area. The building should no longer serve as an operational headquarters. It could instead become a pedestrian friendly interpretive location, a stop along a trail, perhaps, with interpretation of the CCC era, historic park operations and park personnel over the decades. Fire and climate change messages could be other interpretive themes.

It should not be assumed that native populations avoided Big Basin, especially those areas with diverse habitats. With so much clearing due to fire, it is a proper time for an archeological survey in the park, particularly in the burned-over areas. This could be part of a larger effort identifying opportunities for all types of natural and cultural resource surveys. In addition, a renewed effort on resource inventory and monitoring going forward should take place.

LEADERSHIP IN RESILIENT PARK PLANNING

An important message to convey is how we act to reduce global warming and build resilience during the climate crisis. State Parks should set an example by rebuilding and operating the park in a way that reduces carbon emissions. Electric charging stations should be available in visitor parking lots, among other initiatives.

It is not clear that humans could modify fuel levels enough to prevent a wind-driven fire, much less one occurring during record high temperatures and record low fuel moisture levels. The character and impacts of the 2020 fire went beyond "nature's way of renewing the forest." Understanding the limitations of even a robust prescribed burning program, under the altered conditions of global climate change, should be part of the interpretive message to visitors.

We sincerely believe that the future of California's first state park in the current system depends on adopting these recommendations.

Respectfully submitted for CSPRA,



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