

# **Willow Creek Watershed – Manzanita Lake Planning Unit Final County of Madera Request for Consideration of Proposed Uses**

---

## **Previous study results and current proposed uses.**

### 1) Background

In late 2011, representatives from the County of Madera initiated discussions with the representatives of the Stewardship Council regarding the potential donation of property identified as the Manzanita Lake Planning Unit. On January 19, 2012, William Hayter, County Grants Manager and Eric Fleming, County Administrative Officer, presented the request for consideration of the donation PG&E owned land to the Stewardship Council for the intended use of creating an Off Highway Vehicle Park (OHV) and reclaimed tertiary wastewater spray field disposal area. The County's request was contingent upon completion of environmental investigations focusing on Biological, Archeological and Geological studies to determine potential constraints to any such development.

These studies were funded under a grant from the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the studies demonstrated that sufficient biological, geological and archaeological constraints were present that pursuit of the planned development for Off Highway Vehicle uses was not feasible. In addition, the concept and cornerstone of the original proposal was to pursue development of a water reclamation project at the Manzanita Lake Planning Unit site for the Bass Lake wastewater treatment system. This concept is no longer a consideration as another more cost effective location has been found closer to the community.

Since the original concepts are infeasible to pursue, the County herein proposes development of passive recreational uses on the property in conjunction with protecting the archaeological and biological resources which will preserve the natural environment and yet still provide limited recreational opportunities to the public.

## **Compliance with Beneficial Public Values**

In regard to the Stewardship Council's requirement that any use must address and conform to the six Beneficial Public Values (BPVs), Madera County's amended proposed potential uses are consistent with each BPV as follows:

### 1. Protection of the natural habitat of Fish, Wildlife and Plants.

The County of Madera seeks to acquire the donation lands for the purpose of adding to its public open space inventory, as required by its General Plan, and to retain a vital habitat for several endangered or listed plant and animal species. To allow for public access into this area, the County proposes to create limited pedestrian and equestrian trail and day use facilities that would provide connection through the property to the adjacent National Forest. Where possible, trails would reuse fire access roads which already exist. In addition, existing historical physical improvements that exist on the property would be used for day use picnic areas and parking, thereby limiting new land disturbance for vehicle access. The limited development planned for the Manzanita

Planning Unit property is to ensure the balance of the land stays in its current natural form and setting with trail locations designed to avoid intrusion into sensitive locations.

Any development will take into consideration that:

- i) Avoidance of critical habitat is crucial to maintaining endangered or threatened species.
- ii) Trail locations must be designed and maintained to minimize any sediment intrusion into Willow Creek, including intermittent streams and tributaries.
- iii) Measures must be implemented to confine vehicle intrusion to only designated parking areas, currently an issue near the bridge on County Road 222.

## 2. Preservation of open space.

Since the majority of the property will be maintained as a conservation area, the County, in cooperation with the Coarsegold Resource Conservation District and Yosemite Sequoia Resource Development Council will:

- Ensure open space is conserved forever in compliance with a negotiated Conservation Easement held by a third party.
- Maintain open space through woodland management and sustainable forestry. This includes fire fuel reduction measures on a periodic basis and removal of non-indigenous tree species and replanting of native trees.
- Ensure sensitive habitat and cultural/historic sites are buffered from public access. This shall also include areas containing plant species of significance to the Local Native American Tribes.

## 3. Outdoor recreation by the general public.

Recreation and tourism are the major economic engines for this region and Madera County seeks to expand recreational opportunities to sustain the local economy while maintaining conservation areas.

Within the donated lands, existing features within the subject property lend themselves to reuse for public parking and day use/picnic areas which would require some rehabilitation efforts but would also alleviate the cost and impacts of new facilities development. Construction of limited new pedestrian and equestrian trails would provide access to adjacent PG&E and National Forest trails, campgrounds and day use / picnic sites. The proposed use enhances the North Fork - Bass Lake regional recreation area efforts to provide family oriented recreational opportunities.

Note that development of trails will be limited to existing areas historically favored by the public, such as fire access roads, with the exception that alternative route design is required to avoid habitat or to reduce erosion and sedimentation into the stream bed. In addition, the County would cooperate with PG&E to alter trail routes to avoid sensitive installations owned by PG&E and that currently pose a security problem.

The trails development opportunity, even in limited form, provides for multiple levels of participation by trail users that allow vista views of the habitat areas and scenic features,

physically challenge skilled hikers and provides access, where the level terrain makes it possible, to handicapped users. In addition, this would assist in achieving a long term goal for the residents of the unincorporated communities Bass Lake and North Fork, and for the County of Madera, to complete a trail system linking Bass Lake to North Fork along Willow Creek.

The following is the criteria for development of public access:

#### Pedestrian and Equestrian Trails:

- In order to maintain the existing environment issues, especially in regard to the sensitive listed and endangered plant and animals species which are or potentially could be present, the development of pedestrian and equestrian trails, in parallel (where terrain makes this possible), will be limited to specific corridors that link to adjoining trails systems within Forest Service lands and PG&E public use areas.
- Trails will meander through the property to:
  - o Avoid intrusion into areas with sensitive plants, animal habitat, wetlands and thin soil areas subject to erosion;
  - o Ensure that delineation of buffer zones protect and encourage sustained habitat areas;
  - o Ensure trail design minimizes runoff that could cause erosion and sedimentation issues to intermittent streams.
- Minimize trails to 1- 2 north / south orientation and 1 east / west orientation.
- Where possible, combine trails with existing PG&E / Forest Service fire access trails and where possible, on the old abandoned railway embankment that originally was used to haul timber out of the forests.
- In compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements (ADA), provide for wheel chair trail access (where terrain makes this possible) to areas with vista views or points of interest.

#### Day use facilities

- Site parking and limited day use facilities using the old abandoned segment of Central Camp Road, accessible from Rd. 272 for easy access by the public and for easy surveillance by law enforcement. This location represent previous disturbance of the natural environment and reuse of this area limits any new disturbance. (see Site Map)
- Day use area to incorporate public education facilities about the Willow Creek watershed and identification of resident endangered species, conservation areas and conservation efforts.

#### 4. Sustainable forestry.

Establish management practices through cooperation and agreement between the County and the Coarsegold Resource Conservation District to accomplish the following:

- i) Provide ongoing woodland management. This is the essential component of the conservation area in order to maintain the natural habitat and preservation of endangered or listed animals and plant species.
- ii) Provide eradication of non-indigenous species and replanting of native trees. Trees and shrubs are an essential component of a healthy and sustainable animal and plant habitat.
- iii) Removal of overgrowth and brush along with dead trees to limit wildfire fuels. Note that some dead and fallen trees provide essential animal habitat therefore removal must be selective to maintain a habitat balance.

#### 5. Agricultural uses.

For the majority of the subject property, this particular Beneficial Public Value is not applicable. Where feasible, use of grazing cattle to keep vegetation at manageable growth levels may be possible but only in very limited areas.

#### 6. Historic values.

The initial Archaeological study performed on the subject parcel did identify and locate sites of potential interest. Since a large area in the North West portion of the property is too dense to penetrate on foot, it is assumed that other sites may exist. Preservation of this area in its current form will require limiting any pedestrian intrusion.

Reuse of portions of the old abandoned railway embankment for a trail location incorporates the history of logging in the forests and transport by rail of logs to long ago abandoned sawmill sites.

In addition, the property is known to have plant species that are significant to, and a cultural resource of, local Native American Tribes. The County will cooperate with the local Tribes to ensure access and preservation of specific plants is maintained and encourages the Tribes to assist in providing education to the public on the history of how and why such plants are of significance and the uses for which they were harvested.

### **Proposed Management and Enhancements including Implementation and Long Term Management Plan.**

The County proposes to partner with two local organizations to provide long term management of the donated property. The Coarsegold Resource Conservation District and the Yosemite Sequoia Resource and Development Council have each specific woodland and conservation area management expertise.

The Coarsegold Resource Conservation district, formed in 1968 as a governmental entity, has extensive local and regional experience in conservation and woodland management projects oversight and in securing additional funding for same. A representative sample of the types of projects undertaken by CRCD is provided through the links below:

<http://www.crcd.org/willowcreek.html>

<http://www.crcd.org/RangelandVBS-project.html>

<http://www.crcd.org/minarets.html>

<http://www.crcd.org/BLM-FresnoRiver.html>

<http://www.crcd.org/kinsmanflat.html>

<http://www.crcd.org/crooksmt.html>

The Yosemite Sequoia Resource and Development Council is also a local organization with local and regional experience in trails development, management and woodlands preservation and public outreach. In a cooperative venture between the County, CRCD and YSRDC, this entity will provide access to manpower and equipment to promote development of the projects and long term maintenance of the proposed projects as well as a conduit to promoting the trails to the public.

A representative sample of the experience of YSRDC is provided through the links below:

<http://ysrcandd.org/projects>

<http://ysrcandd.org/projects/accomplishments>

<http://ysrcandd.org/projects/succes-stories/22>

<http://ysrcandd.org/projects/succes-stories/23>

<http://ysrcandd.org/projects/succes-stories/living-lightly-in-madera-county>

### **Updated information pertaining to County's capacity, experience in implementing similar projects.**

The County of Madera owns and maintains the Ahwahnee Hills Regional Park in Ahwahnee, California, approximately 14 miles north of the Manzanita Planning Unit site. The park encompasses approximately 241 acres of woodlands and meadows in a setting designed to preserve and enhance the natural environment for the enjoyment of the public.

The park sat fallow for many years until local citizen groups and the Madera County Board of Supervisors banded together to restore the natural setting which includes a creek, pond and historic structures form the original way station at Ahwahnee to Yosemite National Park. The structures include buildings designed by Julia Morgan prior to her gaining fame as the architect responsible for design and construction of Hearst Castle in San Simian, California.

Due to budget constraints and a lack of personnel, the County has taken a unique approach to improve and manage this open space resource. Large parks and recreational facilities require a substantial investment of time and funding for which the County has not in the past, present or in the foreseeable future, had the resources available to pursue development and maintenance of large scale public open space facilities. As such, the County and local citizen groups sought outside funding sources and home grown management groups as a solution to this problem.

Several State grants have been secured to construct trail systems through the park, restore historical facilities, and remove hazardous materials dumped on the site and restoration of the pond. Notably in 2005, the County secured a \$412,000 Proposition 12 Trails Grant to construct two miles of trails and two bridges which cross Peterson Creek of which \$380,000 was allocated to trail and bridge construction, ADA access to the facilities and two prefabricated modular washrooms.

The recently completed (2012) trails network meanders through the woodlands and meadows with a side-by-side network of pedestrian and equestrian paths. The pedestrian network is Americans with Disabilities Act accessible with special parking and unloading area at the trail head.

The Friends of Ahwahnee Hills Park (FAHP), a local citizen non-profit group contracts with the

County to maintain the park facilities. FAHP maintains a permanent resident manager on site to monitor park activities and to make minor repairs as needed. This is necessary as the County has no personnel available on a daily or regular basis to support park activities or to do period maintenance.

Currently, the County has received a \$475,000 Proposition 84 Grant to complete the reconstruction of the old bicycle shop into the new Oak Acorn Center which will provide a small educational facility for adults and children to learn about the native plant species and an observation deck which looks out over the meadows. This grant will also provide solar powered street lights to illuminate parking areas and ADA parking improvements in the main parking lot.

The park trails are well used by residents and visitors for both pedestrian and equestrian and especially by local schools who use the park as a nature studies classroom for students. To further enhance park usage, the County and FAHP are currently seeking proposals for development of an Equestrian Center with a future goal of completing an equestrian trail network north east to Yosemite National Park and south to the community of Oakhurst.

*The Manzanita Planning Unit therefore, provides the County with the opportunity to create one more link in the chain of trails for residents and visitors to traverse through the Madera portion of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.*

The following links provide additional information and photographs of Ahwahnee Hills Park history and current project development:

<http://www.ahwahneepark.org/index.htm>

<http://www.ahwahneepark.org/gallery.htm>

<http://www.ahwahneepark.org/map.htm>

<http://www.sierrastar.com/2013/10/29/65110/discovering-ahwahnee-hills-regional.html>

### **Estimated cost for studies, planning and development work.**

The current amended request for the donation of the Manzanita Planning unit by PG&E to the County envisions a limited pedestrian and equestrian trail network with the vast majority of the property to be maintained as a conservation area. A review of this type of setting with County Planning Department staff has resulted in a finding that the property would remain zoned as Agricultural use and trails development would only require a Negative or Mitigated Negative declaration in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act.

Initial studies into the biological, archaeological and geological constraints present on the property are sufficient under this scenario to make this determination. Requested compensation from the Stewardship Council are therefore limited to the costs for transition of the property and additional short and long term trails development and maintenance. As stated in previous sections, the County is not in a financial position now, or for the foreseeable future, to self-fund these costs.

The cost categories, for which the County seeks financial assistance, as contained in the attached budget worksheet, are as follows:

- 1) Complete property boundary surveys and title transfer costs.

The constraint studies included a boundary survey which used to determine the physical limits of the property for the consultants completing the biological, archaeological and

geological constraints studies. However, the boundary survey was incomplete due to the presence of the FERC areas which are to be held in ownership by PG&E and for which the exact location was estimated by the surveyor. These areas will require a formal determination of the exact boundary for any lands held by PG&E before title to the property can be effectively transferred to the County.

2) CEQA document preparation and Public Outreach.

Due to the reduced scope of development as set forth in herein, the cost of compliance with CEQA is minimized. However, the County would request additional funding to ensure that all neighboring communities and perimeter property owners are aware of the County's proposed development.

3) Planning, design and construction funds for trails development.

It is anticipated that State trails development grant funds may be available in Fiscal Year 2015-2016 per discussions with State Parks and Recreation staff, but State funding is a competitive process with no assurances of success. The County therefore looks to the Stewardship Council to provide "seed money" to plan, design and construct the initial trails.

State grant funding, if forthcoming in the future, would be used to complete the trails and related appurtenances such as parking and day use facilities.

4) Long Term Maintenance.

The County seeks additional funds from the Stewardship Council to offset woodland management and trails maintenance costs. Voluntary donations from trails users will be solicited, along with potential other resources such as funding from local casinos and fire safe grants will be solicited, but it is known that these sources are intermittent and insufficient to offset operational costs.

**Updated Financial information for the County of Madera.**

As requested, the following link provides access to the 2011-2012 consolidated single audit and financial statements for the County of Madera.

<http://madera-county.com/index.php/financial-statements>