



STATE PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION

Residence Inn by Marriott San Jose Cupertino

Cupertino, CA

March 7, 2024

STAFF REPORT: Agenda Item 9: Planning for Climate Change

STAFF: Alex Stehl, Deputy Director of Strategic Planning and Recreation Services Division (SPRSD)

SUBJECT: Update on California State Parks' (Department) efforts to address climate change through the planning process

OBJECTIVE

Climate change is impacting all regions of California and will affect all aspects of the operation and management of California's state parks. Park natural and cultural resources; facilities and infrastructure; visitation and recreation will all be impacted. As a result, California State Parks (Department) must develop plans that anticipate and adapt to a changing climate, while working to reduce its greenhouse gas footprint and educate the public about the climate risks and adaptation opportunities. This staff report will discuss some of the strategies and efforts the Department is pursuing to better plan and adapt to climate change impacts.

INTRODUCTION

California is experiencing long-term changes in climate such as warming temperatures, sea level rise, increased wildfire extent and severity, longer droughts, increased flooding, and more extreme weather events. These changes threaten ecological and human communities. Failure to incorporate equitable and just climate adaptation and mitigation strategies and actions will result in significant fiscal, social, and ecological costs, and threaten the Department's ability to deliver mission-driven resource protection and public recreation access.

To combat and manage the immediate and long-term effects of climate change throughout the State Park System (System), the Department must incorporate the latest statewide policy, draw on best available science, and facilitate implementation of best practices to provide a comprehensive approach for incorporating climate-resilient planning strategies and pathways to forge resilient and adaptive parks.

DESCRIPTION

As stewards of the California State Park System, the Department recognizes that it has a responsibility and an opportunity to address climate change and its impacts. A critical pathway for it to do so is to incorporate climate change considerations into the park planning process.

The Department's planning portfolio, including Park General Plans, Management Plans, Cornerstone Documents, or even project scale plans, provide an essential vehicle for systematic integration of climate considerations into park operations and management. Statewide mandates require carbon neutrality by 2045 and 100% renewable energy by 2035, while supporting climate adaptation and the maximization of benefits of natural lands including conserving 30% of land and waters by 2030. Additionally, the Department must act in accordance with State requirements to equitably connect communities with nature; preserve and enhance community green areas to protect against extreme heat; adapt public infrastructure; avoid and minimize the impacts of climate change; and protect biodiversity in response to the threats of climate change.

Enhancing the Department's planning process provides a mechanism for staff and partners to operationalize these mandates and effectively implement and interpret climate resiliency projects and management efforts. Effective planning underpins efforts that protect and restore the System's natural and cultural resources, assure the development and maintenance of climate-safe infrastructure, and subsequently improve access and service to visitors.

The Department has been working across divisions to update our planning process to reflect a coherent process to consistently address climate change. Inclusion of climate change in these planning efforts will reflect a process that:

- Identifies anticipated climate impacts at the park unit level;
- Evaluates park unit level climate-driven vulnerabilities;
- Identifies needs to adapt park resources to the effects of climate change (recreational facilities, natural resources, cultural resources, etc.)

This effort is drawing on an enormous amount of state-sponsored science and policy and is supported by Climate Fellows courtesy of our partnership with Parks California. State Parks is also collaborating with other entities, including the National Park Service, to draw in critical lessons from their nation-wide approach to climate change planning.

This process is informed by several other concurrent park management and planning efforts that are allowing for collaborative problem solving and application of lessons learned in real time. These efforts include those summarized below as well as the Reimagining Big Basin process (including the Cornerstone Document, Facilities Management Plan, and Forest Stewardship Strategy). What is being learned in "real-time" will help build a statewide planning approach to identify future impacts and adaptive management strategies at the Park Unit level.

Emergency/ Disaster Recovery and Climate Adaptation

For many years the Department has been managing disaster response and recovery to events such as wildfires and floods as an ancillary task, with no dedicated staff or support. As the frequency and intensity of disasters has increased, and more California disasters have been declared eligible for Federal aid, the Department has slowly adapted, doing an excellent job for many years with limited resources. After serious storms damaged dozens of parks in the winter of 2022/23 it was evident that slow adaptation and best efforts were insufficient, and the Department's Facilities and Development Division formalized and dedicated resources to adequately staff a disaster response, adaptation, and recovery team. The Department's FEMA team are currently being brought on board in several disciplines and are already beginning to respond to events as a unified group. The Facilities and Development Division and FEMA teamwork hand in hand with internal and external partners to support the Department's need to respond to and recover from disasters in a manner consistent with long-term climate adaptation and resilience goals. The team also offers subject matter experts and funding, as appropriate, to support various related efforts within the Department.

Wildfire and Forest Resilience Program

The Wildfire and Forest Resilience Program, operating since 2022 as part of the state's larger efforts to address the growing phenomenon of extreme wildfires, is creating a more wildfire-resilient State Park System. The program is working statewide to scale up fuel reduction, prescribed fire, hazardous tree management, facility protection, improved wildfire preparedness, and post-wildfire recovery and restoration. Through the program, the Department recruited and trained additional staff dedicated to ecosystem resilience programs, acquired support equipment, is scaling up prescribed burn activities, increasing outreach and education on best management practices, developing an effective monitoring program, and expanding collaboration with neighboring landowners and agencies for landscape-scale stewardship. This work is amplified through partnerships with Parks California, Native American Tribes, Resource Conservation Districts, and others.

Sea Level Rise Adaptation Strategy

The California State Parks Sea Level Rise Adaptation Strategy (2021) outlines key steps for the System's 128 coastal park units to integrate sea level rise adaptation into the management of coastal projects and plans. As manager of approximately a quarter of the California coastline, the Department is an emerging leader in promoting coastal resilience to sea level rise. Anchored in 6 core adaptation principles, the Strategy supports continued access and recreational opportunities along the coast while preserving coastal natural and cultural resources and engaging the public on coastal resilience. An interdisciplinary sea level rise adaptation team works to implement district-led coastal resilience projects and planning efforts, update policies, inventory coastal assets, develop guidance on best management practices, and develop decision support tools and training on sea level rise and coastal adaptation. The approach is aligned with statewide sea level rise policies and informed by the best available science.

NEXT STEPS

None

RECOMMENDATION

None, staff update to the Commission.

COMMISSION ACTION(S)

None