

California Department of Parks and Recreation

Pilot Program for Unleashed Dog Areas

December 17, 2001

California Department of Parks and Recreation
1416 9th Street,
Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

INTRODUCTION: In a July 9, 2001 memorandum to the District Superintendents and executive policy staff (see attached), Deputy Director Dick Troy indicated Director Areias' interest in addressing the need for off-leash dog parks in urban areas. After speaking with Senator Jackie Speier, the Director indicated his interest in testing a small number of pilot facilities in selected units of the State Park System. Recognizing potential conflicts between off-leash dogs and the Department's Mission, the following selection criteria were established by the Director for potential pilot areas.

Off-Leash Dog Parks should:

1. Not contribute to natural or cultural resources damage;
2. Not displace existing recreational activities;
3. Be enclosed, unless located in areas where there is clear and functional topographical or other significant boundaries;
4. Be located in or near urban units of the State Park System; and
5. Be located in areas having a significant number of "off-leash dog park" advocates to ensure a strong volunteer base for facility maintenance and monitoring.

Deputy Director Troy created a Task Group to examine this concept and make recommendations to the Director for his consideration. The goal of the Group was "to identify potential pilot areas, recommend minimum site requirements, and establish an evaluation program for off-leash dog areas." The Task Group consists of the following individuals:

Rick Rayburn, Chief, Natural Resources Division, Co-Chair
Laura Westrup, Planning Division, Co-Chair
Linda McKay, Co-chair of the Fort Funston Dogwalkers
Robert Herrick, M.D., California Dog Owners Group
Karin Hu, Ph.D., Off-Leash advocate, citizen scientist
Mary Ann Morrison, M.Ed., DogPACSB
Sgt. William N. Herndon, San Francisco Police Department, Vicious and Dangerous Dogs
Hearing Officer
Laura Svendsgaard, Sierra Club representative
Art Feinstein, Audubon representative
Richard Steffen, Senator Jackie Speier's office
Susan Brissden-Smith, Senator Jackie Speier's office
Jeff Price, California State Park Rangers Association
Jacqueline Ball, District Superintendent, Gold Fields District
Kathryn Foley, District Superintendent, Northern Buttes District
Tom Ward, Director's Office
Roy Stearns/Steve Capps, Communication's Office

ISSUE: The Group was given the responsibility of identifying two or three potential off-leash confined dog areas in state park units. The areas selected would be part of a pilot program to test the feasibility of this form of recreation. The program would identify minimum site design characteristics, roles, and responsibilities of the Department and its volunteers, rules governing the use of the facilities, and determine measures of success.

BACKGROUND: Off-leash dogs have not been permitted in parks owned and operated by the Department since the inception of rules governing dogs. The Department believes dogs present a potential threat to visitors, park staff, wildlife and each other, when not under the physical restraint of a leash. In addition, dogs can impact aesthetics and a “sense of peace,” therefore disturbing the park visitor’s experience.

The Department of Parks and Recreation owns, but does not operate the four park units that allow off-leash dogs in designated areas. East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) operates Robert Crown Memorial State Beach, Lake Del Valle State Recreation Area and the East Bay Shoreline Project (Point Isabel). The fourth site is Lighthouse Field, operated by the County of Santa Cruz.

Local park and recreation agencies throughout California have operated off-leash dog-park areas for the last 35 years. As land increasingly becomes developed in highly urbanized communities, dog owners are turning to larger land management agencies to establish off-leash areas for their pets. Over 5 million Californians own a dog; there are over 7 million dogs in California. Many urban dwellers do not own property or have very small yards and prefer parks and other open space areas to exercise with their dogs and to socialize with other dog owners and handlers. Urban dwellers have a myriad of other recreational needs that are frequently met by the local agency provider, such as play areas and sports fields.

PROCESS: The Group met twice over a two-month period for several hours at a time. Between meetings, various members toured potential sites, and discussed the feasibility of off-leash dog areas. Group discussions were often marked by lively debate on the criteria for site selection, suggested rules and regulations, site design and characteristics, locations, measures of success, and the appropriateness of off-leash dog areas in state park units. The Group’s deliberations culminated in the recommendation of unit selection and practices for two pilot sites and two future sites.

The Group reached consensus on the two units in which enclosed dog areas could be taken further in the process of site planning, environmental review, design, funding, and construction. It should be noted that two factions exist within the group, neither of which is totally satisfied with the outcome. *Primary disagreements* within the Group are over the selection criteria established by the Director at the beginning of the effort.

- The first group, represented by dog-park advocates, believes that enclosed areas have drawbacks in terms of dog and owner/handler experience. They would like to see, in addition to the enclosed dog parks, open-trail segments in State Parks (five units were suggested) be made available for off-leash dog use. However, this goes beyond the initial criteria.
- The second group believes that enclosed dog parks should not be established within units of the State Park System and that they would be more appropriately located and operated by local park and recreation agency providers. This position conflicts with the primary purpose of the effort – selection of pilot units for enclosed off-leash dog use. This same group is strongly opposed to off-leash dogs on open trails.

The Group reviewed in detail eleven potential units for off-leash dog use. Five were dismissed, as they were also proposed for trail use and therefore inconsistent with the original project parameters. The remaining six, which appeared to meet the criteria for pilot off-leash dog parks, were reviewed with the District Superintendents, focusing primarily on feasibility. While reviewing park units for pilot-project implementation, the team also prepared recommendations to assist the Districts in designing the dog-park areas, roles and responsibilities of State Park staff and volunteers, suggested dog park etiquette, and the measures of success.

ANALYSIS:

1. **Unit Selection:** Pilot sites were selected for their minimal impact to natural resources and compatibility with existing and future uses. In applying the project parameters to unit selection, the initial review focused primarily on state recreation areas (SRA) within or near urban areas. The list was later expanded to consider other units. The following units were identified as possible candidates:

Folsom Lake State Recreation Area, Sacramento County
Candlestick State Recreation Area, San Francisco County
Prairie City State Vehicular Recreation Area, Sacramento County
San Buenaventura State Beach, Ventura County
Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, Riverside County
California Citrus State Historic Park, Riverside County

A. **Folsom Lake State Recreation Area:** Local support exists for an off-leash dog park at Folsom Lake SRA; however, a general plan is currently being prepared and concerns for potential conflict with other recreational activities exist. In addition, potential damage to natural resources (oak woodlands) could occur.

B. **Candlestick State Recreation Area:** A bayside area, roughly three acres in size, was identified as having several user benefits, including ample parking and informal walking paths. However, one of the areas being considered may require additional fill and may be cost prohibitive. On the plus side, since it is located adjacent to the bay, cost for fencing would be reduced. Strong local support exists for an off-leash dog-park area at this unit, which could lead to a large number of volunteers. The existing general plan calls for future group camping and day-use activities in one of the suggested project areas.

C. **Prairie City State Vehicular Recreation Area:** The potential exists for an off-leash dog-park at this state vehicular recreation unit managed by the Off Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division (OHV). However, at the time this report was generated, an off-leash dog-park advocacy group had yet to be identified. It is recommended that this site be considered as a future location after a volunteer group has been identified. Division management indicates that all improvement costs will come from non-OHV funds due to restrictions on the use of OHV funds.

D. **San Buenaventura State Beach:** A potential dog-park area was identified in an overflow parking/camping, special event, non-beach area that is not heavily used from October through April. Due to seasonal camping/parking use, little or no additional resource impacts would be expected, but the CEQA review will provide more specific analysis of potential impacts. If

operated in the off season (fall-winter months), little or no impacts to recreational activities is expected to occur. Strong advocacy support in the Ventura area exists.

E. Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area: This unit in the Baldwin Hills south of Culver City is partially owned by DPR, but operated by the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation. The County of Los Angeles and the planning consultants are in the process of preparing a general plan. A potential dog-park site has been suggested as a possible use in the southern area of the park near other active recreational facility amenities. However, not all land in this area has been purchased by the Department and priority uses for existing public land has not yet been established. It appears further acquisitions need to occur before a dog park site is determined, designed and constructed.

F. California Citrus State Historic Park: This is the only unit on the “considered list” that is not a state recreation area or a state beach. State Historic Parks are established to preserve and interpret key historic or prehistoric places, events, and practices in California. Rural citrus agriculture is preserved and is interpreted at this unit in Riverside County. The impact of a dog park even outside the historic core area could significantly conflict with the rural agricultural sense of place.

2. Supporting Measures: The team reviewed a number of suggestions within topical areas that could provide assistance to project managers responsible for designing and developing the pilot dog parks, field staff responsible for the dog-park operation, and users of the dog parks. Topical areas include (1) Desired site design characteristics, (2) Roles and responsibilities, (3) Suggested dog-park etiquette, and (4) Measures of success.

All but a few of these specific suggestions were supported by group consensus. Many of these ideas came from locally-operated off-leash dog parks in California. It was agreed that some of the specific suggestions may or may not be used, depending on site characteristics or the potential cost factors. For example, water for dogs and owners/handlers is desirable, but may create a prohibitive expense, and is therefore, would be impractical. In such cases, owners/handlers could provide their own water. Roles and responsibilities of park staff and volunteers will depend, in part, on existing District volunteer programs and superintendent preferences, but the group did not want to encourage volunteers to become the enforcers of the rules. The group did not come to consensus on one issue related to aggressive dog behavior, where several members wanted park access restricted to neutered male dogs, or at least have the owners/handlers possess behavior certification. Due to difficulties regarding the enforcement of this rule, this report does not include this suggestion.

Measuring the success of a pilot dog park was broken down into four areas: (1) dog owner’s/handler’s evaluation, (2) facility impact on other park visitors, (3) safety of site users and, (4) environmental impacts. Much of this information requires fieldwork, surveys, and analysis. The cost of measuring success can be significant and should be factored into other operational costs as well as initial design and construction costs. Environmental measures and early assessment should be done during the general plan amendment process.

3. General Plan Amendment: The need for a general plan amendment for the construction of an off-leash dog park at a park unit was reviewed with DPR legal staff. Given Public Resources Code requirements for general plan approval prior to construction, park general plans not addressing dog parks should be amended before construction.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Units For Pilot Projects**: It is recommended that the Department move forward at the units below for planning and developing enclosed off-leash dog parks.

A. Candlestick State Recreation Area: A potential site has been identified, however, improvement costs, wetland restoration or other factors may determine that this location is not the preferred site. If it is determined that the site has significant limiting factors, an alternative location within the park should be sought.

B. San Buenaventura State Beach: A site with little resource or recreational use conflicts has been determined and should be pursued as a dog park for six months of the year. During months of peak recreational use, the site is used for overflow camping or for special events.

2. **Other Unit Conclusions**: For items A & B listed below, it was determined to be premature for the Department to plan and/or develop dog parks, however, as conditions change in the near future, it may be feasible to move forward.

A. Prairie City State Vehicular Recreation Area: There is no known local dog-park advocacy group to assist in planning/operating a dog park at this unit. If this changes, the Department will consider moving forward with a project.

B. Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area: Since Los Angeles County operates this unit, they would be initially responsible for planning and developing a dog-park facility. However, land acquisition needs to occur and the status of the general plan indicates it would be premature to move forward at this time. Local dog park advocates may want to advance discussions with the County in 6-12 months. The Department should be included in these discussions.

C. Pacifica State Beach and Dockweiler State Beach: During the last few weeks, some Group members and public unleashed-dog advocates have suggested that off-leash beach areas be provided at these two park units. Both units are owned by the Department, but are operated by the City of Pacifica and the County of Los Angeles, respectively. These units were not considered for pilots by the Group for two reasons: (1) they could not be enclosed, (i.e. conflict with selection criteria), without presenting significant conflicts with other park values, and (2) both areas will be subject to near-future western snowy plover recovery planning and management efforts.

Local advocates may discuss their desires with the appropriate operating entity. However, the Department, which must approve amendments to general plans and operating agreements, should be included in these discussions.

3. **Design Characteristics and Roles and Responsibilities**: The following criteria are suggested to assist project managers, District staff that operates and evaluate parks, volunteers, and users.

A. **Desired Site Design Characteristics**:

- At least two acres or more surrounded by a 4' to 6' fence with adequate drainage.

- Double-gated entry area with possibly two separate entry gates and a 20' vehicle/maintenance gate.
- Parking available nearby.
- Clear and well-placed signage for posting rules of etiquette and an information board for park information.
- Shade and water for both the dog and the owner/handler, and seating (away from the fence perimeter).
- Covered trashcans and plastic bag dispenser station.
- ADA compliant.
- Allowance for informal walkways/trails within the enclosed facilities.
- Designed in such a way that other recreational uses could occur.
- Siting, improvements and materials not to impact aesthetics, including entrance area.

B. Roles and Responsibilities:

Department will:

- Provide leadership required with this program.
- Provide overall coordination of volunteers.
- Provide the land for off-leash dog-park facilities; process a general plan amendment and appropriate CEQA compliance where necessary.
- Design and oversee construction in accordance with CEQA compliance. The design will be a collaborative effort with volunteers, where possible.
- Provide normal grounds maintenance (not including cleaning up after dogs).
- Measure, assess, or otherwise evaluate impacts on resources and visitors.
- Provide cost estimates for new or renovated off-leash areas and provide necessary regulatory permits.

Volunteers will:

- Provide regularly scheduled site clean up.
- Distribute park rules to new users by handouts, bulletin-board posts, or through verbal conversations with other site users.
- Stock receptacles with plastic bags.
- Assist with monitoring, use of facility, and gathering of information related to measures of success.
- Work through District Superintendents or his/her designated representative regarding maintenance needs and establish priorities for repair and renovation.

Advocacy Groups will:

- Meet as needed with park staff to discuss successes, issues, problems, and recommendations.
- Organize volunteers to donate labor and materials, or funds for site improvements.
- Organize off-leash training sessions or other permitted special events.
- Assist in developing and distributing education information.
- Solicit and identify funding for amenities, programs, and improvements not provided by the Department.

C. Suggested Dog Park Etiquette:

- Dogs must be leashed prior to arriving and leaving the designated off-leash area. Owners/handlers must carry one leash per dog while in an off-leash area.
- Dogs must be properly licensed, inoculated against rabies, and healthy. No dog less than four months of age is permitted in the off-leash area.
- Female dogs in heat are not permitted within a dog park.
- Aggressive and menacing behavior is not allowed. Any dog exhibiting aggressive behavior must be removed from the facility immediately.
- Owner/handler shall carry a suitable container and/or equipment for removal and disposal of dog feces. Dog feces shall be immediately removed and properly disposed of in the covered trashcans.
- Dogs must be in sight and under the control of the owner/handler at all times.
- No more than three dogs per owner/handler is allowed in the facility at any one time.
- An adult must supervise children under the age of 14.
- The facility is open only during posted hours.
- Owners accept responsibility for the actions of their dogs.

D. Measures of Success:

The following measures are based upon the overall purpose of an off-leash dog area. The data collection instruments, such as surveys, questionnaires, assessments, and reports, are stated in general terms. Further development of these instruments is necessary when specific site implementation occurs.

Purpose of Off-leash Dog Areas:

The purpose of off-leash dog areas is to provide a safe and enjoyable recreational experience to dog owners/handlers and their dogs, while not impacting park visitors or the environment.

Measurements:

1. Dog owners/handlers: The satisfaction level of owners/escorts with the facility and the experience. The frequency of use and number of visits (to be included as a part of the owner/escort survey).
2. Other visitors to the park: The satisfaction level of park visitors without dogs (This information will be gathered as a part of the park's on-going Visitor Satisfaction Survey conducted by staff). Note: this should be a question which compares the compatibility of the pilot dog park with visitor expectations or with the Department's mission, not asking people in different areas about something remote to them.
3. Safety of dogs and park visitors: Incidents of injuries to dogs and or visitors. Park staff will gather this information as a part of the normal procedure for reporting visitor injuries, crimes, or other incidents.
4. Environment: The type of environmental assessment will be tailored to meet the needs of the selected sites. The initial criterion for site selection is based upon an initial assessment of minimal impact to the identified area. Finer levels of monitoring

and evaluation will be applied based upon the unique attributes of each of the pilot sites after the completion of a general plan amendment. Environmental assessment will be the responsibility of Department staff.

NEXT STEPS: After review of this report, and if it is acceptable to the Director, it is recommended that the following steps in the order indicated below be accomplished. Target completion dates are estimated assuming that full effort begins by August 1, 2002 at the point when the Department has completed the majority of work on the \$157 million deferred maintenance program, a high priority workload.

- Schedule General Plan Amendments – Consult with the Planning Policy and Program Committee to determine impact on DPR's general plan schedule. January 10, 2002.
- Project Manager – Identify a project manager for any project to be carried forward. May 1, 2002.
- Preliminary Cost – Assign the appropriate staff member to develop estimated preliminary costs for off-leash dog parks at Candlestick SRA and San Buenaventura SB. Costs should be itemized so non-essential improvements, such as shade or water, can be identified if scaling down becomes necessary. July 31, 2002.
- Funding – Determine source of funding for projects to be carried forward. July 31, 2002.
- Processing General Plan Amendments – Initiate work on general plan amendment(s), including environmental assessment, environmental measures of success, and user measures of success. December, 2002.
- Design – Design the project, complete the PRC 5024.5 process, and perform CEQA analysis. Secure necessary permits. February, 2003.
- Commence construction. March, 2003.

It is expected that the steps above may be completed two months earlier for the San Buenaventura State Beach project due to relatively straightforward park and site conditions.

DURATION OF PILOT PROJECT: The pilot dog-park areas should be operated for two years from opening before formal evaluation of the program. It is estimated that the evaluation period would be during the six months following the two-year anniversary of opening.

State of California – The Resources Agency

Memorandum

Date: July 9, 2001

To: District Superintendents
Executive Policy Staff

From: Department of Parks and Recreation
Park Operations

Subject: Pilot Program for Unleashed Dog Areas

Formal unleashed dog areas have multiplied throughout the US in recent years. Here in California, State Senator Jackie Speier introduced legislation (SB-712) calling for a review of specific State Park units as potential locations for such dog facilities.

On June 13, 2001, in discussions with Senator Speier, Director Areias expressed support for meeting the demand for this growing recreational pursuit in California, particularly in urban areas. However, he also identified several political, operational and resource constraints related to any broad application of this activity in the State Park System. At the conclusion of the discussion, he committed to testing a small number of 'pilot' facilities in selected units of the State Park System. The selection of these pilots would involve discussions with supporters for unleashed dog areas, as well as groups who have concerns about such areas.

Further discussions with the Director clarified the basic criteria for selecting 'pilot' unleashed dog areas in the State Park System. These areas should:

- Not contribute to natural or cultural resource damage;
- Not displace existing recreational uses;
- Be enclosed, unless located in areas where there are clear and functional topographical or other boundaries;
- Be located in urban/near urban units of the State Park System;
- Be located in areas having a significant number of 'unleashed' supporters to ensure a strong volunteer base for maintenance and monitoring;
- Be located in units that have supportive operations management.

To begin the process, I am chartering a task group to identify potential pilot areas, recommend minimum site improvements and to establish an evaluation program. The task group will be jointly chaired by Rick Rayburn, Chief of the Natural Resources Division and Laura Westrup of the Planning Division and will consist of:

- 4 supporters of unleashed dog areas
- 1 member of Senator Speier's staff
- 1 representative of CSPRA
- 1 representative of the Audubon Society
- 1 representative from the Sierra Club
- Various DPR staff (including 2 District Superintendents)

The goal of the department is to have 2 to 3 pilot unleashed dog areas open, operating and being evaluated by the spring of 2002. We all know the sensitivity that this subject carries among the majority of our staff. I am asking that we all keep an open mind as we take a small step to test the compatibility of this activity in the State Park System.

If you have questions, feel free to call or e-mail Rick or Laura.

<original signed>
Dick Troy
Deputy Director

cc: Bill Berry
Ron Brean
Steve Treanor
Steade Craigo
Carol Nelson
Donna Pozzi
John Shelton