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Proposed Ballot Measure Filed to Protect California State Parks & Conserve Wildlife

Adoption of Parks Access Fee Would Grant Californians Free, Year-Round Admission To All State Parks

SACRAMENTO – An exploratory committee comprised of parks supporters today filed a proposed statewide ballot measure, called the “California State Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust Fund Act of 2010,” which would create a stable, reliable and adequate source of funding to protect state parks and conserve California wildlife.

The committee, Californians for State Parks and Wildlife Conservation, is currently considering the feasibility of the proposed ballot measure. If it decides to go forward with the initiative and qualify it for the ballot, via signature gathering, the statutory measure would appear on the November 2010 statewide ballot. Early supporters of the proposed ballot measure include California State Parks Foundation, The Nature Conservancy and Save the Redwoods League.

From the vast stretches of sandy beaches along California’s magnificent coastline to the towering redwoods and much-needed recreational areas in the state’s bustling urban centers, California’s 278 state parks, which include state beaches and state historic parks, are priceless public assets and a vital legacy for our children and grandchildren.

However, budget cuts have starved state parks, causing them to accumulate a backlog of more than \$1 billion in needed maintenance and repairs. Roofs and sewage systems leak, restrooms are not cleaned regularly, bridges have collapsed, trails are washed out, campgrounds and visitor centers are shuttered and buildings and structures throughout the system are badly deteriorated. Thousands of scenic acres are closed to the public because of reductions in park rangers, and crime has more than doubled. Destruction and vandalism of the parks themselves has grown fourfold, and beachgoers are often unprotected because of decreases in lifeguards.

Twice in the past two years, state parks were on the brink of being shut down. Only last-minute budget reprieves kept them open. But nearly 60 state parks will be shut down part-time or their hours of operation reduced because of this year’s budget cuts, and more park closure proposals and budget cuts are expected next year.

“California state parks are in peril because of chronic underfunding,” said Elizabeth Goldstein, President of the California State Parks Foundation. “Our state parks were once considered the best in the nation, and now they’re falling apart and threatened with closure because they have no reliable source of funding. This parks measure would create a dedicated funding source to prevent park

closures, eliminate a backlog of more than a billion dollars in repairs and properly maintain parks and other natural resources for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.”

The ballot measure would protect state parks and conserve wildlife by establishing the State Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust Fund in the state treasury where, by law, it could only be spent on state parks, urban river parkways, wildlife, natural lands and ocean conservation programs. Funding for the Trust Fund would come from an \$18 annual State Park Access Pass surcharge on all California vehicles, including motorcycles and recreational vehicles. Larger commercial vehicles, mobile homes and permanent trailers would be exempt. Vehicles subject to the surcharge would receive **free, year-round admission** to all state parks throughout the year. Californians will no longer pay day-use fees at any state parks. In comparison, park visitors currently pay up to \$125 for an annual pass or \$10-\$15 per day at most parks. Out-of-state vehicles would continue to pay full entrance fees at parks.

“California’s 278 state parks are priceless public assets, a vital legacy for future generations and essential to strengthening our economy,” said Mike Sweeney, Executive Director of The Nature Conservancy in California. “This ballot measure would protect these vital resources and give more Californians access to our state parks by providing free admission to the occupants of all vehicles paying the State Park Access Pass surcharge. This is a small investment that will provide great long-term returns for the health and well-being of our parks and people.”

Rather than living on a budget rollercoaster, state parks and other natural resources would now be funded by a reliable funding stream that would not be used for other purposes. And, with a new dedicated revenue stream in place, state General Fund dollars - that have historically provided a portion of overall state parks funding - would now be available for other vital needs, like schools, health care, social services or public safety.

“In these trying times, it’s essential we keep the parks open to protect a crucial economic engine for California,” said Ruskin Hartley, Executive Director of the Save the Redwoods League. “California state parks also play a critical role in conserving our natural resources by protecting natural areas that are sources of clean air and water and provide essential habitats for wildlife. This measure would help conserve lands that are vital to the health of people and nature.”

The voters’ investment would be protected by strict fiscal and accountability safeguards, including an annual audit by the State Auditor and a Citizens’ Oversight Committee would be created to ensure funds are spent appropriately. The State Legislature would not be able to reallocate the Trust Fund for any other uses.

State parks attract millions of tourists, who spend \$4.32 billion annually on park-related expenditures in California, according to a recent study. It found state parks visitors spend an average of \$57.63 in surrounding communities per visit. They generate so much economic activity that every dollar the state spends on state parks generates another \$2.35 for California’s treasury.

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The California State Parks and Wildlife Conservation Trust Fund Act of 2010 was developed by a statewide coalition of interests committed to protecting state parks and natural resources. California's 278 state parks are priceless public assets, important economic engines, and a vital legacy for our children and grandchildren. However, persistent budget cuts are starving state parks, causing them to fall severely behind in needed maintenance and repairs. The measure would establish a dedicated and reliable funding stream for state parks and natural resources to ensure they can be enjoyed for generations to come.