



September 2, 2008

Mr. John Kirlin, Executive Director
Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force
650 Capitol Mall
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Kirlin:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Delta Vision Strategic Plan. State Parks plays a small but important role in the Delta: preserving examples of its extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation. State Parks will soon release a strategic plan for its units in the Delta and other parts of the Central Valley, as part of the Central Valley Vision implementation plan which the Department is drafting in response to 2007's AB 1426. Reviewing the Delta Vision Strategic Plan at the same time we are drafting our own strategic vision for the Delta's State Parks which provides a special opportunity to coordinate water management, ecosystem restoration, and outdoor recreation planning in the region.

The proposed Delta National Heritage Area would be consistent with the direction likely to be proposed in our Central Valley Vision implementation plan. We support assessment of the heritage area's feasibility. The Delta Vision Strategic Plan's recommendations about state recreation areas, however, are not consistent with our emerging Central Valley Vision implementation plan. A North Delta state recreation area, as recommended in your report, is not likely to be successful and does not have the Department's support. Your report's suggestions for other recreation areas also need revision to better reflect the resource values and recreation opportunities of these units and surrounding lands

Our detailed comments are attached. Should you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Dan Ray
Chief
Planning Division

cc: Linda Fiack, Delta Protection Commission

Delta National Heritage Area

A California Delta National Heritage Area can be an appropriate tool for enhancing residents and visitors "sense of place" about the Delta. It can also provide the flexibility required by the Delta's changing landscape and the local leadership that Delta residents are more likely to accept. The additional grant funds that such a designation could bring would be helpful in improving visitor opportunities and protecting unique resources in the Delta.

Designation of the Delta as a heritage corridor through the California Recreational Trails System, as provided in PRC 5070-5075.7, could provide state recognition of the region's significance that paralleled or anticipated federal recognition.

State Recreation Areas

State Park System units in the Delta provide important recreation for the region's residents and visitors from other areas. These units offer camping, picnic sites, boat landings and marinas, interpretation, and other outdoor recreation opportunities. They can serve as "base camps" from which visitors can explore the Delta's historic communities, natural areas, agri-tourism sites, angling, waterfowl hunting, and other attractions.

- North Delta State Recreation Area Liberty, Prospect, and Little Holland Tract should not be recommended as a new State Recreation Area. Their restoration may be desirable to help recover populations of Delta fish and wildlife, but they lack the attributes of a successful State Park System unit. Instead, they should be restored and managed by agencies, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) or Department of Fish and Game (DFG), whose primary responsibility is habitat management and who are more integrally involved in large scale habitat restorations (e.g., DFG's San Francisco Bay restoration projects or the riparian forest restoration at Central Valley wildlife refuges.)

Liberty, Prospect, and Little Holland Tracts would be poorly suited to become a state recreation area for several reasons. Restoration plans for Liberty, Prospect, and Little Holland Tract portray the restored islands as primarily open water and marsh, without substantial uplands suitable for the kind of recreation facilities that make State Park units successful. Opportunities for activities that can generate significant user fees, which are an important source of state park system finance, are few. The islands location distant from easily accessed public roads would limit their use by typical state park system visitors. In addition, the islands are distant from existing state park system units, so that rangers, maintenance and interpretive staff, or equipment required for the unit's operation would all need to travel long distances to oversee and operate the unit. By contrast, Franks Tract State Recreation Area (SRA) is a short 15 minute boat trip from nearby Brannan Island SRA, allowing easy access when ranger patrols or other park operations there are needed. Finally, involvement of State Parks in the restoration and operation of these units would require our agency – which has not been deeply involved in Bay-Delta management

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activities – to become an expert partner in Bay-Delta ecosystem management and flood control policy and activity. Other agencies, such as FWS, DFG, or DWR that already have this expertise are better suited than State Parks to restore and manage these islands.

- Delta Meadows. Delta Meadows and the adjacent town of Locke, where State Parks is restoring the historic Locke Boarding House, are an outstanding example of the Delta's traditional landscape of marshes and riparian forests, river towns, and agriculture. With appropriate improvements, the unit can also provide an important locus for visitors who are angling and boating on nearby sloughs and river channels, seeking to learn about the Delta's water management facilities, or -- after implementation of DWR's North Delta restoration program -- wishing to explore the restored marshes and woodlands of the McCormack-Williamson Tract or other parts of the nearby Cosumnes Preserve. Our Central Valley Vision implementation plan contemplates completion of the unit as initially envisioned in the feasibility study for this area. Delta Meadows deserves its own identity, rather than being merged with Brannan Island State Recreation Area, as recommended in the Delta Vision Strategic Plan.
- Brannan Island. Brannan Island State Recreation Area (SRA) provides a full range of recreation improvements for a wide variety of Delta recreationists. Picnickers, birdwatchers, anglers, wind surfers, boaters, and campers all find recreation opportunities at the unit. The unit's boat landing and berths also serve as a point of embarkation for visitors to nearby Frank's Tract SRA. Brannan Island SRA's location adjacent to Twitchell and Sherman Islands can make it an ideal "base camp" for visitors who may seek recreation at Twitchell and Sherman Islands as public lands there are revitalized as marshes or for other uses. Cooperative management of Brannan Island SRA, Franks Tract SRA, Twitchell and Sherman Island, and DFG's Lower Sherman Island Wildlife Area, can create a Delta recreation complex with 10,000 acres of public lands in close proximity to residents from Stockton, Sacramento, and Contra Costa County. Cooperative management of these lands would provide a stronger identity for the area than would creation of the separate recreation area on Sherman Island that is recommended in the Delta Vision Strategic Plan.
- South Delta/San Joaquin River flood plains. Caswell Memorial State Park is just upstream of the Delta on the Stanislaus River, near Ripon. The park's 258 acres offer camping, picnicking, swimming, fishing, tubing, bird watching, and hiking and protect one of California's finest mature oak riparian forests. Opportunities to strategically expand and improve the park to better serve visitors and protect resources are being explored in our Central Valley Vision implementation plan. A significant outdoor recreation complex easily accessible to visitors from Stockton and Modesto could be created through cooperation between Caswell Memorial State Park and those responsible for the San Joaquin River/South Delta floodplains

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recommended for Delta Conservancy actions and further planning on pp 58 and 69 of the Delta Vision Strategic Plan.