

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 10, 2005

LIGHTHOUSE RANCH ACQUISITION

File No. 05-001
Project Manager: Jim King

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Wildlife Conservation Board towards the acquisition of the 5.5 acre Lighthouse Ranch at the south end of Humboldt Bay in Humboldt County for improved public access.

LOCATION: The property is located 12 miles south of Eureka in Humboldt County at the western edge of Table Bluff, approximately five miles west of U.S. Highway 101 (Exhibit 1: Project Location)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location
- Exhibit 2: Site Photographs
- Exhibit 3: Site Map
- Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 - 31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to the Wildlife Conservation Board (“WCB”) for the purpose of acquiring Humboldt County Assessor Parcel No. 308-041-006 known as the Lighthouse Ranch, consisting of approximately 5.5 acres.

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for the acquisition, the WCB shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):

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- a. All relevant acquisition documents, including, without limitation, an appraisal, purchase agreement, escrow instructions, environmental or hazardous materials assessment and title report.
 - b. Evidence that sufficient funds are available to complete the acquisition.
2. The WCB shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Department of General Services.
 3. The WCB or the Bureau of Land Management shall execute an agreement or other instrument as deemed appropriate by the Executive Officer permanently dedicating the property for the purposes of open space protection and public access.
 4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the Property, the design and location of which has been approved by the Executive Officer.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the Public Access Program, Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide up to \$500,000 to the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) toward the acquisition of the 5.5-acre Lighthouse Ranch located atop Table Bluff, overlooking the Eel River Delta, southern Humboldt Bay and the Pacific Ocean in Humboldt County (Exhibit 1: Location). WCB would organize the acquisition and contribute \$1,000,000 of its total \$1,500,000 cost, including all costs associated with the transaction. Title to the acquired property would be held by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) which has agreed to manage the property in perpetuity for open space protection and public access.

Lighthouse Ranch is a developed site occupying a prominent coastal bluff with exceptional panoramic views (Exhibit 2: Site Photographs). Once the property has been acquired, BLM would rehabilitate structures on the site for use as a caretaker residence, maintenance facility and as a hub for public access and law enforcement for the surrounding public lands. In the vicinity of Table Bluff some 9000 acres are managed by four public agencies: BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and County of Humboldt. While Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge to the north and east of Table Bluff is serviced by a new maintenance facility and a small visitors center near Highway 101, much of the public land

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extending from the mouth of Humboldt Bay to the mouth of the Eel River lacks adequate facilities needed for stewardship and visitors services. These include the BLM-managed South Spit Wildlife Area to the north, DFG's Eel River Reserve and Table Bluff Ecological Reserve to the south and east respectively, and Table Bluff County Park immediately to the north of Lighthouse Ranch. Vandalism and habitat loss has been a chronic problem at the remote coastal sites.

Development at Lighthouse Ranch includes several residences and storage structures and a number of smaller outbuildings. The location and characteristics of the property are ideal for immediate use as a management facility and, over time, development of a visitors center that would provide the public with information about the natural resources preserved in the area.

A public agency presence at the Lighthouse Ranch site was a key objective of the Humboldt Beach and Dunes Management Plan adopted by the Conservancy in March 1995. A management agreement would be developed to provide for joint use of the property by DFG and BLM including development of a caretaker unit, maintenance and law enforcement support facilities and visitors services. BLM would assume costs for demolishing unsafe structures and site improvements needed to develop the intended uses and costs associated with long-term management of the site.

Site Description: The 5.5 acre Lighthouse Ranch is twelve miles south of Eureka and about five miles northwest of Loleta on the western edge of Table Bluff. The property overlooks the Eel River Delta, southern Humboldt Bay, South Spit and the Pacific Ocean. The site is generally flat with a gentle western slope and includes several buildings that are either vacant or used for storage (Exhibit 3: Site Map). Despite its name, there is no lighthouse on the property. A functioning lighthouse developed on an adjacent private property in 1892 was moved to Woodley Island Marina in Humboldt Bay in 1987, after automated beacons installed at the Humboldt Bay Harbor entrance in the 1970's eliminated the need for a Table Bluff beacon.

The property has a commanding view of the surrounding landscape and is bordered by public lands except for a 2.5- acre private in-holding on the northwest corner of the bluff. That property is judged to have little, if any, potential for development.

Table Bluff Rd. and DFG's Table Bluff Ecological Reserve form the eastern boundary of the property. DFG's 2200-acre Eel River Wildlife Area abuts the property to the south. Table Bluff County Park and the BLM's South Spit Wildlife Area, a 960-acre dune and wetland complex, extends north from the base of Table Bluff immediately below Lighthouse Ranch for five miles to the jetty forming the entrance of Humboldt Bay. The ranch's seven principal structures occupy about half the area of the property and are served by graveled roads interspersed with areas of lawn and planted Monterey Cypress windbreaks. The structures include a 70-foot high water tower that is not in use. There are three residential dwellings: two single family homes with two and three bedrooms respectively and a duplex with two-plus bedrooms each. These structures have been maintained by the property's current owner and are in good condition. A tennis court, above ground water tanks and several sheds are also located on the property.

There is also a very large two-story main structure that is judged to be in poor condition and unsafe. The upper floor was once used as dormitory housing; the lower floor has a large kitchen area, and dining/meeting hall, and several additional rooms. On the second story, above the kitchen area, is an additional unit that was once used as an apartment. This structure would be demolished by BLM.

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Two buildings occupy a commanding site near the edge of the bluff overlooking the beach. One housed a former U.S. Navy radio station and foghorn in times past and was once used by the current owners as a chapel. Another was a carpenter's workshop, later converted to a horse barn and finally a bunkhouse. Both are now used for storage. Along the eastern boundary of the property at Table Bluff Road is a building with three large bays and several other garage-type rooms.

Project History:

The proposed Lighthouse Ranch acquisition and the conversion of structures there for public purposes is an important action needed to secure the Conservancy's longstanding investment in the area. With its panoramic views of south Humboldt Bay, South Spit and the Eel River Delta, the site is viewed as the best location for providing visitor services and a public agency presence in this remote area. Indeed, development of the site for these purposes has been viewed as essential to bringing stability to an area where inappropriate human activity has resulted in recurring damage to natural resources, particularly from illegal off-road vehicle use and unauthorized camping.

The great sand spits that extend north and south from the entrance to Humboldt Bay have been a Conservancy emphasis since 1990. That year the Conservancy authorized a \$80,000 planning grant to Humboldt County to resolve conflicts between various user groups, to identify the potential for access improvements, and to investigate acquisition, enhancement and restoration opportunities. The South Spit had traditionally provided a wide range of recreational opportunities for visitors including sport fishing, clamming, hiking, bird watching, diving, hang-gliding, kayaking, surfing, wildlife study, and off-highway vehicle use. It is also renowned along the West Coast as a premier waterfowl hunting area for black brant. The unique dune and wetlands habitats that provided for these public uses were largely unmanaged and unprotected.

The Conservancy adopted the Humboldt Beach and Dunes Management Plan in March 1995, and soon after authorized \$250,000 in funding to Humboldt County to initiate phase one of the plan. Activities under that grant focused primarily on the North Spit, since the South Spit was largely privately owned by the Pacific Lumber Company (PALCO). Negotiations with PALCO for acquiring their South Spit holdings were prolonged, and, as they proceeded, the property was severely overused by off-road vehicles (ORV) and a growing colony of squatters.

In fact, illegal overnight "camping" on the South Spit became such a problem that by 1997, it's estimated that up to 300 squatters camped there depending on seasonal conditions. Lacking adequate infrastructure to support human habitation, the South Spit became a public health and safety hazard, and Humboldt County (joined by PALCO and the Fire Department) filed a lawsuit to evict the squatters. A locked gate went up in the fall of 1997, and a measure of control was gained with the overnight camping problem. However, because many members of the public were able to obtain keys to the gate, inappropriate ORV activities continued to degrade the dunes.

In response to the growing public concern for deteriorating conditions, the State Legislature directed the Conservancy in 1996 to outline the potential for public acquisition, access development, and management of the Spit. The resulting South Spit Management Plan was presented to the Legislature in 1997. In 1998/99 the Legislature appropriated \$500,000 to the

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Conservancy for restoring the South Spit while negotiations with PALCO continued. Upon an agreement being reached with PALCO in 2001 providing for the donation of its South Spit holdings to the State, the Conservancy authorized funds to the Redwood Community Action Agency to identify, design and construct improvements that would provide for suitable public access while preventing damage to sensitive natural resources. The project was successfully installed, and, subsequently an easement and management rights for the spit were conveyed to BLM. In 2005, with road access now upgraded, vehicle barriers and parking lots developed and toilets installed, most of South Spit and much of the surrounding public lands are now open to the public for day use.

Increased public use is expected with the improvements realized in recent years. Though safeguards have been established for many of the unique habitats in the vicinity, the area continues to suffer from ORV use, arson, illegal encampments, vehicle abandonment, waste disposal and vandalism. The adopted management plan acknowledged the need for a public agency presence to combat lawlessness and to provide visitor information and interpretive elements to orient and enlighten visitors. Lighthouse Ranch has long been viewed as the best setting for these purposes and key to assuring that natural resources are protected with increased public use.

PROJECT FINANCING:

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|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Wildlife Conservation Board | \$1,000,000 |
| Coastal Conservancy – Prop 40 | 500,000 |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,500,000 |

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy's FY 03/04 appropriation from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) which can be used to acquire and protect coastal land and water resources pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, sections 31400 *et seq.* Section 31400 of the Public Resources Code states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. In the proposed project, the Conservancy's contribution to the acquisition of Lighthouse Ranch will provide for public access at Table Bluff, a prominent coastal headland. The proposed funding authorization thus furthers the purposes of §31400.

Section 31400.1 states that the Conservancy may award grants to any public agency to acquire or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coastline. Section 31400.3 enables the Conservancy to aid public agencies in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. The proposed funding authorization to WCB and fee title ownership by BLM, conditioned upon use

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agreements ensuring public access, is consistent with Sections 31400.1 and 31400.3 Also consistent with Section 31400.1, in providing funds for the acquisition of Lighthouse Ranch, the Conservancy will be taking a significant action to improve public access to coastal resources in the Humboldt Bay region that serves the needs of the local community as well as visitors from outside the region.

Consistent with Section 31400.2 the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the acquisition of interests in lands for purposes of the chapter. The amount of funding proposed for the Conservancy contribution to the project has been determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, an evaluation of project eligibility and priority to effectively meet the provisions of the division, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of a prominent 5.5 acre coastal property, and, as an accessible coastal visitor-serving site, open space and views will be protected.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B**, the proposed project will open an area previously inaccessible to the public while minimizing impacts on natural resources and respecting the rights of nearby property owners.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project has widespread public support, including that of Assemblywoman Patti Berg, Senator Wesley Chesbro, Congressman Mike Thompson, environmental organizations and community groups. Letters of Support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** Lighthouse Ranch is located within the coastal zone of Humboldt County.
5. **Need:** The opportunity to secure the Lighthouse Ranch property could be lost without Conservancy support. The Wildlife Conservation Board has committed all the funds it can to this project and the Conservancy's participation affords the opportunity to meet our mutual public access goals.

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6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Lighthouse Ranch property is located on a prominent coastal bluff adjacent to several thousand acres of coastal public lands managed by four different local agencies. Structures at the site will be rehabilitated to deliver visitor information for the region to local users as well as visitors from distant locales.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Negotiations with the Lighthouse Ranch owners have produced an agreement for purchase at a fair market value as determined by an appraisal approved by the Department of General Services. The purchase represents a fleeting opportunity, in cooperation with WCB and BLM, to secure this coastal resource for public use.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Public ownership will result in enhanced public access and visitor-services at the site and also serve as a center for public agency stewardship and law enforcement.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Conflict resolution:** The acquisition of Lighthouse Ranch and rehabilitation of the site provides the opportunity to resolve longstanding public use conflicts associated with the region, particularly illegal camping and off-road vehicle entry to fragile dune and wetlands habitats on South Spit, adjacent to Lighthouse Ranch.
11. **Readiness:** With an appraisal of the property approved by the Department of General Services, WCB has negotiated a transaction that is acceptable to the landowners. All funding has been identified and the project is ready to move ahead.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
12. **Cooperation:** DFG, BLM, FWS, and County of Humboldt work cooperatively now with limited resources to manage the 9000 acres of public land in the vicinity of Table Bluff. As a condition of the proposed acquisition, BLM and DFG will enter into an agreement addressing their cooperative use of the Lighthouse Ranch site, public access to the property and future visitor-serving improvements. The cooperative use of the centrally located property by BLM and DFG represents an efficient use of public resources in support of land management and visitor services.

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CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Humboldt Bay Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Plan (LCP) certified in 1982 as follows:

Chapter 3 – Humboldt Bay Area Development and Resource Policies, Section 3.50 B. Access Development Policies, Coastal Code Section 30210 states:

“In carrying out the requirement of Section 2 of Article XV of the California Constitution [now Article 10, Section 4], maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with the public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.”

Chapter 3 – Humboldt Bay Area Development and Resource Policies, Section 3.50 B. Access Development Policies, Coastal Code Section 30212.5 states:

“Wherever appropriate and feasible, public facilities including parking areas or facilities, shall be distributed throughout an area so as to mitigate against impacts, social and otherwise, of overcrowding and overuse by the public of any single area.”

Chapter 3 – Humboldt Bay Area Development and Resource Policies, Section 3.50 B.1.a. Accessway Improvements and Funding, states in part:

“Public agencies or other entities having or accepting responsibility for accessways shall provide support facilities compatible with the character of the land and adequate for the number of people using them prior to opening the access to public use.”

The proposed acquisition and the new coastal access that it provides are in accord with these LCP access development objectives. The project will assist the County in implementing its local coastal program as it pertains to the Table Bluff area of the Humboldt Bay Area Plan. It will also assist BLM and DFG in providing the management necessary for improved public access, public safety and effective resource protection inherent with these policies.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Acquiring the Lighthouse Ranch property is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15325. Section 15325 exempts transfers of interests in land in order to preserve open space, including, but not limited to, acquisition of areas to preserve the existing natural conditions. This acquisition will provide for public access to a coastal headland with unique open space and scenic characteristics. It will also provide a public agency maintenance and management presence that will serve to reduce vandalism and foster stewardship on the acquired site and surrounding public lands consistent with Section 15325. Staff will file a CEQA Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.