



AUDUBON CANYON RANCH

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Tim Haddad, Environmental Coordinator
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September 1, 2005

RE: DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR LAWSON'S LANDING
MASTER PLAN, COASTAL PERMIT, AND TIDELANDS PERMIT.

Dear Mr. Haddad:

Audubon Canyon Ranch (ACR) owns coastal dunes and shoreline property at the southern end of the coastal dune system evaluated in the Lawson's Landing DEIR. The ACR property is at Toms Point and Brazil Beach and is part of ACR's system of wildlife sanctuaries that includes approximately 450 acres of shoreline properties on Tomales Bay. Our conservation research programs in Tomales Bay include field investigations and biological monitoring at Lawson's Landing. ACR has been concerned about the future of Lawson's Landing for many years and we have articulated these concerns to the County in response to previous efforts to develop a master plan for the site (letters of March 28, 1995 and May 30, 1995), as well as in response to the Initial Study and scoping process for the EIR (letters of October 19, 2000 and October 26, 2002).

The master planning process for Lawson's Landing provides an excellent opportunity to balance the spectacular recreational opportunities of the area with the protection of a rare and beautiful coastal landscape. In fact, the long-term sustainability of both the natural values of the site and the quality of recreational experience depends on establishing such a balance. However, in our view, the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Lawson's Landing Master Plan does not provide an appropriate alternative for the continuing management of recreational use nor does it provide appropriate protection for natural resources of the area.

The DEIR does not provide a realistic alternative that addresses fundamental natural resource issues raised in the scoping of the project. Such an alternative would provide a design for recreational use that protects and restores wetlands and dunes, protects rare species, and significantly reduces visitor impacts, by harmonizing rather than competing with the natural processes that sustain the landscape. In this regard, the following elements of the DEIR, each associated with critical points raised in our previous letters, are needed to achieve a realistic alternative that would protect and preserve both recreational and natural values of the area.

1. The DEIR fails to consider the cumulative adverse impacts of continuing intensive use. The "baseline" use of the area has never been subject to environmental review,

and the likelihood of significant environmental degradation caused by the cumulative effects of existing uses over time should be carefully evaluated. The DEIR does not provide adequate detail to evaluate such impacts and none of the alternatives provide assurances that such impacts can be avoided.

2. Many of the proposed measures to mitigate the effects of significant impacts lack sufficient detail to evaluate the likelihood of success and lack mechanisms to ensure those impacts will be minimized.
3. The DEIR does not adequately delineate limits on visitor use. Maximum-use limitations of 1000 vehicles per day far exceed current normal use. The appropriate metric for managing the cumulative effects of visitors in natural areas is annual user-days—not peak daily use. Under the proposed limits, planned improvements, and increases in the use of coastal areas in general, will induce would likely increase both the extent of daily use and the number of days that maximum daily limits are reached. Under such conditions, significant environmental impacts are likely.
4. The DEIR does not adequately protect wetlands. Specifically it does not address (i) the cumulative environmental impacts of continued camping in wetlands, (ii) significant wetland impacts associated with increases in the number of annual visitor-days, or average daily use, for camping, or (iii) opportunities for wetland restoration. In addition, an adequate wetland delineation of the property is still needed to allow for a reasonable assessment of wetland impacts. The reported boundaries do not include a delineation of wetlands recognized by the California Coastal Act and does not accurately reflect the normal configuration, extent, or annual fluctuation of jurisdictional wetlands in this dynamic system. In addition to relocating new structures and trails away from jurisdictional wetlands (DEIR 14.13-3), camping should be prohibited within 100 feet of all wetlands. To address these issues, a wetland protection alternative, substantiated by a thorough assessment of wetland boundaries, analysis of appropriate wetland use, and recognition of opportunities for restoration should be included in the DEIR.
5. Because the protection of sensitive dune-slack wetlands is one of the most critical environmental concerns for this area, the DEIR should consider the opportunity to restore the severely degraded, lower-wetland meadow where much of the current camping occurs. This is the largest wetland area on the property. The potential viability and need for protecting and restoring this area is indicated clearly by (i) substantial bird use we have observed on days when the area is not used for camping, (ii) it's location at the lower (southern) end of the drainage, and (iii) the existing ditch system that continues to drain the meadow. The restoration and protection of this resource should be incorporated into a wetland protection alternative.
6. The natural processes that sustain the mobile dunes should be restored and protected. The dynamic nature of the dunes and dune wetlands would be best protected by removing the European beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*), which inhibits the natural movement of sand. However, each of the alternatives in the DEIR would result in a continuing conflict between recreational use and the environmental processes that sustain the dunes. None of the alternatives allow for the restoration of coastal dunes. This is probably because the area currently used for camping depends, not only on the inappropriate use of jurisdictional wetlands, but

also on the stabilization of the coastal dunes by invasive, nonnative beachgrass, which severely degrades the associated ecological values. A wetland protection alternative would refocus intensive uses away from sensitive areas and allow for the restoration of the coastal dunes.

7. The DEIR ignores potentially significant new impacts on Federally threatened Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*). Under the proposed alternatives, unregulated increases in *average* daily (rather than peak daily) recreational use would be allowed. This would further degrade Critical Habitat and potential nesting areas for Snowy Plovers, and no associated mitigation measures are proposed. In addition, the proposed new trail system through the foredunes would also impact Critical Habitat for Snowy Plovers, but no associated mitigation measures are proposed. The lack of any current efforts at Lawson's Landing to protect this species from recreational use—the primary cause of the loss of suitable habitat and population decline—indicates a critical need to include mechanisms for protective management in the DEIR.
8. The DEIR should include a complete analysis of potential environmental impacts on adjacent and surrounding lands and waters. The interconnectedness of sensitive natural areas in the vicinity of the proposed project, and the role of Lawson's Landing as a major support facility promoting recreational use in the Tomales Bay area, indicate that potential impacts may extend substantially into the surrounding area.

The points discussed above were included or referenced in our comments submitted during the scoping process for the EIR (letters of October 19, 2000 and October 26, 2002). Together, they provide a set of serious environmental concerns that are not adequately addressed by the alternatives presented in the DEIR. These concerns focus on the need for wetland and dune protection. A wetland-protection alternative should have been considered. Such an alternative would consider the enhancement of both the environmental and recreational values of the property. This dual enhancement might be achieved, for example, by relocating intensive camping and associated new structures to a more stable, less-sensitive area adjacent to the dynamic dune-wetland landscape (such as dune-scrub or non-native grassland areas). Stable, upland conditions in such areas would allow individual camp sites and parking to be designated and maintained, which would establish inherent limits on the number of visitors and vehicles. Campers would benefit from a lower-impact experience and would use appropriate trails to access the beach, dunes, and wetland areas, thereby minimizing adverse effects on sensitive habitats.

ACR cannot support any of the alternatives proposed in the DEIR because none provide reasonable protection against significant ecological impacts. We urge the County to require a revision of the DEIR that evaluates alternatives to protect the ecological values of the dunes and wetlands. Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Maurice A. "Skip" Schwartz
Executive Director

John Kelly, PhD
Director, Research and Resource Management