



June 2, 2014

Cicely Muldoon, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes, CA 94956

Re: Scoping comments on Comprehensive Ranch Management Plan

Dear Superintendent Muldoon:

The Environmental Action Committee of West Marin (EAC) greatly appreciates the opportunity to provide scoping comments on Point Reyes National Seashore's (Seashore) Ranch Comprehensive Management Plan Environmental Assessment (Ranch Plan). Since 1971, EAC has worked to protect the natural environment and rural character of West Marin.

EAC strongly supports the Seashore's Ranch Plan process as a way to work collaboratively to find creative solutions that ensure that national park resources and wildlife are protected while simultaneously ensuring the viability of historic ranching and dairy operations. As one of the few national parks with active agricultural operations, Point Reyes provides a unique opportunity to showcase how wildlife and sustainable agriculture can co-exist and thrive. EAC strongly supports a Ranch Plan, and resulting 20-year leases, that strikes this important balance.

EAC appreciates the significant commitment and time investment that you, your staff, and Congressman Jared Huffman have made to the process by having multiple meetings in the past several months with the agricultural operators in the Seashore and the environmental community. EAC has engaged in its own due diligence process the past year in anticipation of a NEPA process for the 20-year pastoral zone leases. As part of this effort, EAC met with Betty Nunes from A Ranch, and Joey Mendoza from B Ranch, and heartily applauds their organic certifications. At our meeting, we had a productive conversation where EAC heard first-hand about the significant financial impact the present drought conditions have had on these dairy operations. We listened closely to their concerns about the Ranch Plan process. We look forward to working collaboratively with Ms. Nunes, Mr. Mendoza, their families, and other Seashore agriculture operators throughout the Ranch Plan process. Additionally, EAC has met with you and members of the Seashore staff, including wildlife biologist Dave Press, to discuss ongoing concerns and impacts from the native Tule elk population on dairy operations at the Outer Point.

Even with this information gathering, EAC has many more questions than answers. We believe that, overall, the dairy and cattle operators want their current operations to continue. However, because we are uncertain of individual agriculture operator needs, much of our comment letter seeks additional clarification about how the Seashore will address specific issues that will impact

the dairy and cattle operations and national park resources. With this background in mind, EAC offers the following scoping comments and questions on the Ranch Plan.

Baseline: What is the baseline against which the Ranch Plan and new 20-year leases will be measured? The baseline for consideration of environmental impacts should be what the existing leases provide for, most of which represent existing authorized conditions and practices. If leaseholders have violated their permits, for instance, the unauthorized practices should not represent the baseline.

Additional questions that should be considered in determining the baseline for the Ranch Plan include: 1) What impact did the removal of the several hundred exotic deer that foraged in the pastoral zone and at the Outer Point have on the amount of available forage for cows? 2) Will the level of forage consumption by the exotic deer be accounted for in the baseline?

Short and long-term Management goals: Will the Seashore identify short and long-term management goals and metrics to incorporate into the new leases? If so, the Seashore should identify science-based criteria to determine the success of each short and long-term goal. EAC supports providing incentives for lease compliance and simple, easy to understand permits. Additionally, there must be simple, clear consequences for non-compliance with lease terms.

Tule Elk: The Seashore is the only national park with a native population of Tule elk, and it is important to remember that the elk, just like seals and whales, are an important part of the ecosystem. Tule elk have been prevalent in the Bay Area and Marin for thousands of years, and long before their extirpation in the 19th century. The public loves to see the elk on D Ranch while driving to and from Drakes Beach, and complete removal of the elk from the Outer Point seems impracticable. Certainly, the drought conditions the past two years have exacerbated the conflict between Tule elk browsing their historic range at the Outer Point and dairy cows grazing. EAC is doubtful that a fence along the border of the Philip Burton Wilderness Area will keep the elk from returning to the Outer Point; the elk are at the Outer Point because that was part of their historic range.

EAC believes that the 20-year leases and overall agriculture management strategy must strive to reduce conflicts and find a way to balance and accommodate the presence of both cows and elk so that dairy operations at the Outer Point can remain strong and vibrant. There is no simple solution to the free-roaming Tule elk population, and EAC truly sympathizes with the dairy operations that have been the most impacted by the small free-roaming herd. EAC understands that, due to the drought conditions this winter, dairy operations had to purchase a second semi-truck load of organic hay that cost approximately \$9,000 and directly affected the operation's bottom line. One idea is to further reduce lease prices for operators adversely affected by elk. Another idea is for an outside group like EAC or the Marin Farm Bureau to establish a fund to which the public could contribute to support the purchase of additional organic hay in drought years. All creative ideas should be on the table to find the right balance to maintain this native species and support the organic dairy operators.

Diversification: What level of diversification of agricultural production could be allowed under the original legislation for the Seashore? EAC's reading of that legislation is that it provided for ongoing dairies and cattle ranch operations. Under what authority could the Seashore justify allowing anything greater than a small area, perhaps 1-2 acres per historic farm, of diversified agricultural use.

Operational flexibility: Operational flexibility is distinct from diversification. Flexibility encompasses, for example, the ability to adjust the number of dairy cows an operator has. When EAC met with Betty Nunes of A Ranch, she indicated an interest to add, over time, more dairy cows, but at a level that would be below the carrying capacity of A Ranch. Given that all six dairies in the Seashore are organic, this type of flexibility should be enthusiastically supported as long as it does not contribute to overgrazing or water quality impairment issues.

Herbicides/Weed Management/Pasture Management: What is the current usage level of herbicides to control weed management? Is the current level assumed to be the baseline? Will the Ranch Plan include weed and pasture management plan? What priority will the Seashore place on restoration of native grasses?

Worker Housing: What is the current level of worker housing provided by the agriculture operators? Is it all safe, up to code, and able to pass public health inspection? Are housing leases limited to workers in the Seashore? Will the Seashore take an inventory of the housing and number of tenants?

Succession Planning: What is the Seashore's current policy for succession planning when a family no longer wishes to operate under their lease? The Park must create a new policy to guide management and distribution of a leased area when the existing family chooses to quit its lease. Such a policy should provide how or whether it applies to leaseholders with outstanding non-compliance issues. Preference should be given to families who have implemented Best Management Practices, have a long-term history of strong lease compliance, and those who may have given up some of their leased area in the past for native plant restoration [like the A Ranch].

Silage Production and Mowing: How does the Seashore ensure that allowances for silage production are followed? Silage production kills hundreds of nesting birds per year. EAC would not support expanded silage production. The Seashore must establish a simple program to monitor silage production and mowing and have penalties where limits are exceeded.

Best Management Practices: EAC supports the incorporation of BMPs into the 20-year leases. How will the Seashore measure success of each BMP? One management practice that is necessary is to transition cattle out of the wetlands and headwaters of all the bays of Drakes Estero. These sensitive areas should be fenced off to maintain water quality and only allow flash grazing as necessary and based on set protocols.

Public Access: How will the 20-year leases ensure ongoing public access across the pastoral zone? The leases should make clear that public has the right to access the ranch lands. The increased use of electric fences must not preclude full public access.

Event Rentals: All events should go through the Park headquarters special use permit process. Individual leaseholders should not have the authority to permit major special events.

Native Grass restoration: EAC supports providing incentives and grant funding to restore native grasses that are drought resistant and which were historically present.

Electric Fencing: How much electric fencing is currently in use in the Seashore? EAC would not support this becoming the dominant form of fencing. The Ranch Plan must analyze the cumulative impacts of such fencing on public access and wildlife movement.

Mitigation: What areas impacted by cows require mitigation? Will the Seashore require non-compliant ranchers to perform and pay for mitigation as needed for impacts to natural resources in the event of lease non-compliance? Will each new 20-year lease include notes about outstanding management issues and mitigation needs that are carried over from prior leases?

Wilderness: The Philip Burton Wilderness area should not be manipulated or changed as part of any management strategy to accommodate the Tule elk. Absolutely no structures should be authorized in the wilderness area that would diminish or compromise management of this area as wilderness.

Fair Market Value Calculation: How does the Seashore calculate lease prices? What are the assumptions and factors that are included in this calculation?

AUM Calculation: Will the Animal Unit per Month (AUM) calculation be reevaluated in light of the heavier animals today? The AUM has historically been based on a 1,000-pound animal, but market records reveal PRNS cattle operators regularly selling 1,250+ pound animals. These heavier animals eat more grass and could be contributing to overgrazing of Seashore ranch lands.

Public Documents and Public Process: Will the 20-year leases become public documents? Public oversight of the Seashore ranch provisions will help ensure the goals of the Ranch Plan are met.

Citizen Monitoring of Compliance: Will the Ranch Management Plan include a provision and process for the public to make formal complaints about non-compliance with lease terms and Best Management Practices? This process could require a formal complaint letter with details and photos, and provide for the Park to perform due diligence and timing to follow-up and respond to the compliant.

Climate Change and Endangered Species: How will the 20-year leases incorporate flexibility for the Seashore to adjust for impacts of climate change? How will drought and climate change impact AUM calculation? How will the leases address existing or newly discovered endangered species?

Thank you very much for your commitment to ongoing viable agriculture in Point Reyes National Seashore, and for your consideration of our comments.

Respectfully yours,



Amy Trainer, Executive Director

Cc: Congressman Jared Huffman
Assembly Member Marc Levine