

June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021



Protecting Marin Since 1934

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Subject: Suggested Approaches to Watershed Recreation Management Plan

Dear Shaun:

Now that Marin Water (“District”) has officially launched the Watershed Recreation Management Plan process (Community Workshop #1, June 8, 2022; Watershed Committee Meeting, June 16), Marin Conservation League would like to contribute comments in the hope that they may offer some guidance as the process rolls out.

At the outset, we commend the District Board and staff for taking on the challenge of continuing to reconcile their dual mission of providing clean, affordable drinking water and stewarding a 21,000-acre (total) watershed rich in biodiverse and vulnerable resources, with accommodating growing recreational uses and the public benefits and challenges associated with those uses. Unlike many water agencies that restrict human activities from their lands, the District has been generous in supporting recreational visitors, even as their numbers have grown exponentially and modes and technologies of recreation have changed drastically.

Background to MCL’s interest. Since its founding 88 years ago, MCL has been advocating for the well-being of Mt. Tamalpais and its watershed(s) through actively participating in – even initiating – planning processes to better understand the District’s responsibilities for meeting water supply needs and managing watershed resources, at the same time enabling the public to enjoy the many health and social advantages of outdoor activities.

The first attempt to comprehensively study the District’s lands as an inter-related ecosystem and water system was initiated by MCL in the early 1970s and resulted in the ground breaking “Environmental Planning Study” (1974) by U.C. Berkeley landscape planners Robert Twiss [ret.] and Tom Dickert [dec.]. Among its detailed studies of watershed conditions, it included a survey of recreation and its associated environmental problems and use conflicts, noting among many other observations

“ . . . problems of trail erosion, sedimentation, trampling of delicate vegetation and hillside scarring created by increased recreational use cannot be separated from land-management decisions regarding the location and design of district facilities. Nor can the problems of overuse or inappropriate use.”

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The study also recognized that some solutions could be found in identifying and avoiding areas of ecological sensitivity and in locating activities in response to the varying capabilities of the land to sustain them without degrading results.

Forty years later, in 2016, Chief Ranger Bill Hogan, in retiring after a 38-year career with the District, described to an MCL audience the vastly increased pressure from recreation that had grown under his “watch,” from an estimated 750,000 - 800,000 annual visitors in 1974 to 1.6 million estimated in the often-referenced 2012-2013 User Survey. Hiker/walker/runner use remained constant, at about 70% of all visitors, while bike use had grown from 2% to 30%. In the same time period ranger staff had decreased to seven rangers plus two deputies. He noted many of the problems and visitor conflicts that confronted the reduced security ranger staff on a daily basis. Today, annual visitors have grown to 1.8 million.

Even before the Visitor Survey, the District’s Road and Trail Management Plan (2005), while not addressing recreation *per se*, alluded to the impacts of recreational use in describing the road and trail network:

“Roads and trails can have many undesirable effects on the environment. They can increase the number of visitors and intensify human use in seldom-visited areas. They can provide migration routes for non-native invasive plants into previously un-infested areas and facilitate the spread of Sudden Oak Death syndrome. They can fragment habitats (in some cases environmentally sensitive habitats) by creating migration or foraging barriers to some wildlife. They can physically remove habitat or a portion of it. Moreover, construction of roads and trails can disturb or destroy, directly or indirectly, plants or animals that are legally protected. Wetland areas, riparian areas, serpentine soils (which are fragile, erodible soils that can contain a host of endemic, rare and endangered species of plants), and active nesting or roosting areas, are all sensitive habitats that require protection in one form or another. Furthermore, *an increase in the density and amount of human presence in previously untrammelled or seldom visited areas leads to an increase in the severity of effects and a proliferation of additional effects.*” (Emphasis added)

Recognizing that recreational issues on District lands were by no means unique to that jurisdiction, MCL spent many months studying the environmental implications of road and trail use throughout Marin’s public lands – in construction, improvements to, maintenance, and visitor use – and adopted its first Road and Trail Management policy in 2015, amended 2019. (attached) MCL’s primary goals in advocating for appropriate management and use of Marin’s road and trail networks were to

“ . . . avoid adverse impacts to natural resources due to recreation, ensure that the natural environment and the plants and wildlife it sustains will persist into the future, and assure users of their safety and well-being on all roads and trails.”

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## MCL Recommendations to guide the Watershed Recreation Management Plan

The history of recreation summarized above is not news to either board or staff of Marin Water! Aided by social media, the popularity of the watershed extends well beyond the Marin community and continues to grow unabated, straining the capacity and condition of facilities and furthering behavioral conflicts on roads and trails. At the same, the land itself is finite, the water sources it supports are limited, and threats of drought and wildfire risk exacerbated by a changing climate, disease, and invasive species are real and costly to manage. The financial resources, including personnel, the District is able to commit to activities secondary to its primary mission are highly constrained. These pervasive limitations must be acknowledged as the District goes forward in “rethinking” recreation on the watershed – not just trying to “fix things,” although that is a starting point. Based largely on its own Road and Trail Management policy, MCL suggests the following cautious approaches to the new Plan:

1. Plan within the limits of available resources. Given the historic failure of financial resources, including ranger personnel, to keep pace with the expanding visitor demand, a practical approach for the Watershed Recreation Management Plan would be to adopt the theme . . . *“Manage what we have – but do it better.”* This means focusing first on correcting (“fixing”) existing problems, such as public facilities needed for basic sanitation, improving directional and other signage, providing basic educational materials on appropriate use of the watershed, and improving passive use facilities such as for picnicking in popular areas. It also means resolving long-standing illegal non-system trail issues, such as Happersberger Trail, whose continued use impacts adjacent public lands, other non-system trails that have been highly eroded by unauthorized use, and system trails on south-facing District lands, also subject to chronic unauthorized use.
2. Shift the recreational focus. One way to “manage what we have” would be for the District to step back and take a longer view of the Mt. Tam watershed with its lakes, forested ridges, woodlands, meadows, and spectacular views – and through interpretive activities and communication, reemphasize District lands as water source, as refuge for wildlife, and as a welcome respite for people’s passive enjoyment, not simply as the District’s free and active playground for public amusement.
3. Redefine and expand successful existing volunteer programs as “stewardship recreation.” In shifting the recreational focus away from the “playground” mentality, leverage existing volunteer programs, including cooperation with One Tam “citizen science” programs, by engaging a broader public, notably underserved communities and young people, in interactive volunteerism. This would not only broaden opportunities for more people to learn about the significance of water and sensitive resources in the watershed and enjoy outdoor experiences, but also enlarge the volunteer workforce.
4. Resist pressure to promote more recreational travel into remote wild areas of the watershed. Remote areas of the watershed offer a “wilderness” that serves the vital function of refuge

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for wildlife sensitive to human activity. While specific data on actual wildlife use is seriously lacking from District inventories, opening these refuge areas to ever-expanding intrusion of all recreation modes runs counter to widely documented evidence that animals are impacted by recreation in complex ways and need habitat areas and times of day and night to carry out life functions in an undisturbed setting. Night-riding, which continues to grow in popularity in spite of its illegal presence on District lands after sunset, is particularly disruptive to dusk-active wildlife. A study in 2018 found that many wildlife species were avoiding human contact by becoming more nocturnal – so when mountain bikers and runners don powerful headlamps on cool summer evenings, they’re pursuing wildlife into their very last refuge: darkness.

5. Resist pressures to “construct your way out” of a perceived shortfall in bike-legal trail miles. Across the landscape of Marin’s public lands (<180,000 acres total, including some 600 miles roads and trails), the opportunities for recreational access are almost infinite. The District’s watershed, at just 11 percent of the total, is not responsible for satisfying the almost daily requests for “more miles” that Marin’s public land managers all receive. All evidence points to the potential impacts of trail construction. The Azalea Hill multiuse route, in progress, offers a clear example of the environmental and physical considerations, structural details, cost, and time that go into installing new track or improving existing routes for even a few miles. Even with volunteer help and outside grants, the District is ill-equipped to pursue this approach on a large scale.
6. Put more “eyes” on monitoring trails and roads. Mountain bikers complain about dogs off leash, people on foot complain about speeding bikes (the major source of conflict on the watershed, followed by illegal use of restricted trails and dogs off leash), and some complain about the presence of horses on the trail. Although these may represent a minority of trail encounters, they are sufficiently frequent to destroy the trail experience for many visitors and even displace them from popular roads and trails. Peer-to-peer communication is the most effective way to get buy-in on observing rules and the needs of other visitors. A robust volunteer patrol – a “Trail Ambassador” program – made up of hikers, horse-mounted patrol, and mountain bikers willing to admonish their renegade peers would add hugely to “eyes” on the trails and serve as a constructive educational presence. An annual “Trail Pass” program, administered for a modest fee, would go even further by engaging every visitor in sharing responsibility for the well-being of the mountain and the watershed.
7. Support educational programs with meaningful enforcement. Education alone cannot manage the behaviors of the most renegade visitors. Ranger enforcement must be strategic, carry meaningful sanctions, and be supported by a committed Board that bad behavior will not be tolerated. On a pragmatic note, outgoing Chief Ranger Hogan, based on his 38 years, admitted that “There will never be ‘enough’ staff per acre of jurisdiction. Some regulations are easier to enforce than others, some are rarely enforced for good reason, and some are virtually unenforceable. Regulations are valuable, however, as leverage to promote good decision making and discourage bad behavior.”

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In conclusion, no one is expecting perfection in the forthcoming Watershed Recreation Management Plan. Along with the other approaches suggested above, MCL believes that a shift in overall attitudes in visitor use of the watershed would be a worthy outcome of the new Watershed Recreation Management Plan.

Sincerely,



Robert Miller  
MCL President



Nona Dennis  
MCL Director  
Member, Parks & Open Space Committee