

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This Project Description and Public Access Plan overview describes a site-wide, programmatic approach to public access for recreation at the Estero Americano Coast Preserve. The Plan outlines goals and policies related to public access, access plans for compatible passive, low intensity recreation, an implementation plan, and design and maintenance guidelines.

Preserve Overview

In late December 2015, through the combined efforts of Sonoma Land Trust and other funding partners (State Coastal Conservancy, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, and Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation) The Wildlands Conservancy acquired the 547-acre Estero Ranch. Located on the border of Sonoma and Marin Counties, this acquisition prevents habitat fragmentation from development and serves as an expansion of the California Coastal Trail via Shorttail Gulch, as well as recreational use of the Estero Americano.

The Estero Americano Coast Preserve consists primarily of coastal prairie habitat with a three-quarter-mile stretch of Pacific Ocean coastline. The property includes a one-mile section along the mouth of the Estero Americano estuary, which is part of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. Due to its diverse assemblage of wetland communities and estuarine habitats, the property is recognized by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as one of the most significant habitat areas in the State.

The Preserve will provide opportunities for low intensity public outdoor recreation (hiking), nature study, environmental education, and research uses. The preserve provides breathtaking views of the Estero Americano, Point Reyes, and Bodega Head, and offers prime wildflower and wildlife observation as well as whale watching opportunities.

Proposed Project

The Public Access Plan entails the establishment of a network of approximately five miles of designated hiking trails as an integral component of the overarching proposed Project. The primary component of the hiking trail will consist of a five-foot-wide mowed vegetated pathway and will incorporate existing ranch roads, covering approximately one mile. The average slope of the trail is approximately 8%, with variations ranging from 5% to 14%. (A map illustrating the locations of existing and proposed trails and roads is attached as a PDF document). The projected public access utilization of the preserve will experience gradual growth as outlined in the phases outlined below. Overall, the expected level of use is anticipated to be of low intensity, due to the limited number of hiking (only) trail miles and the proximal access to additional recreation trails and activities.

The Public Access Plan will be executed in three distinct phases:

Phase 1 (2022-2023): This phase encompasses scheduled public vehicular access via Estero Lane and guided hikes/tours conducted by TWC (limited to 4 per year).

Phase 2 (Expected timeframe - 2024): In this phase, only scheduled public pedestrian access will be provided, originating from Shorttail Gulch and connecting to existing trail systems. Additionally, public kayaking access will be facilitated from Valley Ford to Estero Beach. Basic public restroom facilities and informational signage will be installed, and plans for staff housing and restroom development will be outlined.

Phase 3 (Expected timeframe - 2025-2027): During this phase, Preserve Trails will be open to the public daily from 8 AM until sunset, with no admission fees. Existing structures will undergo renovation to accommodate staff housing, and public restrooms will be integrated within the existing building envelope.

Table 1: Simplification of information on proposed phases, timeline and actions.

	Year	TWC tours only	Scheduled Short Tail Gulch access, hiking, kayaking	Initial restrooms and trail signage developed	Renovated staff housing & Kiosk developed	Full Public Visitation daily free of charge
Phase 1	2022-23	X				
Phase 2	2024		X	X		
Phase 3	2025-27				X	X

The trail network will include a combination of single- and multi-use trails which will allow public access for the following:

- Hiking
- Kayaking or other non-motorized water access (via existing access at Valley Ford)
- Dog walking (on-leash only)
- Picnicking and small group gatherings
- Nature observation

- Overlook observations with sitting stones/benches, information signage and potentially spotting scopes

These uses will be allowed during daylight hours only (8am to sunset), except on a limited basis by request to preserve management or permit.

Prohibited uses will include:

- Smoking
- Alcohol use
- Fire making (permitted use only)
- Collecting
- Hunting
- Fishing
- Off-road vehicles or motorized transport
- Mountain biking
- Camping
- Equestrian use

Key design goals for the designation of the trail network include the following:

- Land access to various points of interest, including the beach at the mouth of the Estero Americano, will be facilitated through a network of hiking trails. These trails will follow both pre-existing ranch roads and newly established overland mowed routes, all of which have been carefully designed to ensure the preservation and persistence of the sensitive resources found within the Preserve. The refinement of these routes has been guided by the results from the surveys attached herewith, with a primary focus on avoiding and minimizing any adverse impacts on the environment while also informing the potential design of future improvements.
- Construction and improvements include: road repair to sections of the road serving as trails, building and installation of an entrance gate located adjacent to the Sonoma County Regional Parks Shorttail Gulch Trail, well-marked trail signage, installation of an informational kiosk and picnic tables as well as portable restrooms.
- Avoid and/or minimize, to the extent possible: neighbor views, safety hazards, and impacts to sensitive resources including aquatic resources , wetlands, and cultural resources

- The Biological Resources Technical Report provides avoidance, minimization, mitigation measures to reduce potential biological impacts to less than significant and also includes several adaptive management actions.
- Botanical, wetlands, geo-technical and archeological/cultural surveys have been conducted to help inform and guide public access planning and trail delineation.
- Accommodate other property uses, including cattle grazing, Aqua-culture farming and research uses
 - The property consists primarily of coastal prairie grassland. TWC uses light to moderate grazing as a management tool to maintain and enhance the grasslands, while consistently implementing measures to protect wetland and riparian habitats.
 - Construction of wildlife friendly cattle fencing is proposed running N-S across the property to better utilize rotational grazing especially in the upland hills in efforts to reduce grazing impacts on lower, flatter areas which are in proximity to wetlands (see map for details).
 - In addition there is a land survey of the Aqua-culture lease-hold boundary which is located on the property and plans include a buffer/fencing around the 13 acre Aqua-culture farm.
- Public and community engagement regarding proposed plans to acknowledge the sensitivity of coastal communities and neighbors to public access

As part of **Phase 1**, the current approach involves hosting four scheduled events per year that grant access to the Preserve via guided vehicle tours along Estero Lane. These guided hikes will persist, utilizing existing roads and the planned trail systems.

During **Phase 2**, we will initiate the establishment of an approximately five mile trail network, which will be open to the public for regularly scheduled visits. These trails will be easily accessible through a pedestrian gate located along the Shorttail Gulch Trail. Phase 2 trails will accommodate hiking and on-leash dog walking, and they will feature various overlooks and points of interest, including benches, seating rocks, interpretive signs, viewing telescopes, and more.

The implementation of Phase 2 is anticipated to take place over a 1- to 2-year timeframe. It will also include amenities that support non-motorized watercraft users accessing the preserve from the existing access point at Valley Ford. This will involve the creation of a pullout area near the Estero's mouth, complete with portable restrooms and access to the trail network. Additionally, the development of suitable restroom facilities will commence during this phase, utilizing the existing northern building envelope and incorporating renovations to the existing septic systems.

While staff will be present during all scheduled visits to the preserve during Phase 2, they will not be residing on-site full-time until the commencement of Phase 3.

Phase 3 implementation will span a period of 2 to 5 years and will necessitate TWC to open its gates to the public for daily recreation without any associated fees. In Phase 3, our foremost focus will be the construction of staff housing to ensure a continuous security presence on the property, manage emergency situations effectively, and engage with the public, neighboring communities, and preserve lessees in a suitable manner. As the designated date approaches, detailed designs for the staff housing will be disclosed, which will involve the renovation of existing infrastructure. This renovation will also encompass upgrading the septic system to accommodate public use.

Furthermore, Phase 3 will encompass the finalization of Preserve infrastructure, including the installation of informational signage, as well as the fulfillment of our obligations to provide low intensity public outdoor recreation, environmental education, and research uses, provided that such uses are compatible with the protection of the Property's natural resources as outlined in the Conservation Easement and Recreational Covenant and associated with the property.

Operation and Maintenance

Designation of trails will only involve mowing and use of the existing ranch roads. Trail placement along the coastal bluff will be set back at a safe distance from the bluff edge. The utilization of heavy machinery and vehicles will be restricted to areas accessible via established ranching roads. The construction and upkeep of wildlife-friendly fencing for cattle grazing will be entrusted to qualified professionals with specialized expertise in this field.

Future design plans encompass enhancements to existing structures, such as the renovation of TWC staff housing to enhance property security and address maintenance and management requirements promptly. Additionally, improvements are slated for visitor amenities, including restroom facilities and an information center.

The general maintenance and management of the preserve will be overseen by TWC's Sonoma Coast Preserve team, comprising the Regional Director, Preserve Manager, Rangers, and Trail Stewards.