

California State Parks – Channel Coast District
Gaviota Creek Estuary Restoration Project
Public Workshop Summary
December 30, 2025 @ 5:30pm

On December 30th, 2025, CA State Parks held a Public Workshop presenting a targeted estuary restoration project at Gaviota State Park (SP) pursuant to a court-approved settlement agreement with Coastal Ranches Conservancy. The presentation slides from the workshop are available on the Gaviota SP Estuary Restoration Project web page. During the workshop presentation, an overview of the Workshop was provided starting with Gaviota SP's regional coastal setting. A description of the project was detailed, and there was an opportunity to ask and receive answers to clarifying questions, and in addition an opportunity to submit formal comments was detailed and encouraged.

Regional context for Gaviota SP was presented by showing its location within California, and more specifically Santa Barbara County. Gaviota SP includes coastal terraces, Gaviota Creek, an estuary, and sandy beach, reflecting strong interactions between coastal, fluvial, and tidal processes. Although CA State Parks owns and manages the campground, creek corridor, estuary, and beach within Gaviota SP, the settlement project specifically focuses on the area downstream of the creek crossing, adjacent to the campground.

CA State Parks explained that it is required to consider items such as alternative access or removal of facilities in the park unit's statutory General Plan process, including CEQA review. Therefore, this settlement project must be separated from bigger picture restoration efforts within Gaviota SP that would require changes to facilities, access, or other resources.

Separate from this project, CA State Parks is moving forward with larger scale, multi-departmental planning under the General Plan in order to address the issues present within Gaviota SP. CA State Parks encouraged all participants to participate in the General Plan process, and specifically the February 12, 2026 Public Engagement Meeting for the El Capitan, Refugio, and Gaviota General Plan Update, details are available on the general plan website at www.ecrgplanupdate.com. CA State Parks then explained that they received technical input from regulatory agencies and relevant parties; their input was used to inform the project being presented. The Lower Gaviota Creek supports a dynamic mosaic of remnant and newly forming tidal marsh and riparian habitat that are dominated by native halophytic vegetation (including but not limited to Pickleweed, jaumea, alkali heath, and saltgrass). In addition, the estuary remains high-value habitat for sensitive aquatic and riparian species. The Gaviota SP campground, parking lot, and stream crossing are exposed to both coastal flooding and high stream flow during storm events.

CA State Parks explained the primary stressors addressed by this project as (1) the wetland and riparian areas that have been degraded by non-native plant infestations, and (2) the concrete and asphalt debris altering the hydrology and plant recruitment. These stressors reduce habitat quality and reduce the estuary's adaptive capacity to sea level rise and high-flow events. CA State Parks then presented the three design principles for this project, again keeping in mind the parameters of the settlement terms:

1. Best Available Science: Based on current understanding of estuarine hydrology, sediment dynamics, vegetation response, coupled with Agency review & feedback.
2. Near-Term Ecological Benefit: Focuses on near-term habitat improvements through invasive species removal and native marsh and riparian enhancement.
3. Protective of Long-term Planning: Scoped to avoid foreclosing comprehensive, long-term restoration opportunities to be evaluated through the General Plan.

These principles, in conjunction with the settlement terms, were used to develop goals of the project:

1. **Restoration of 3.0 acres of coastal salt marsh**, resulting in enhanced tidal habitat, improved ecological integrity, while supporting resilience to sea level rise.
2. **Restoration of 1.0 acres of riparian habitat**, enhancing streamside riparian vegetation and ecological integrity, and supporting natural hydrologic and geomorphic processes.
3. **Remove concrete, asphalt, and irrigation debris**, improving habitat quality and geomorphic function.

After completing overview of the project description, CA State Parks provided the opportunity to participants to receive answers to any clarifying questions. Explaining that all comments must be submitted in writing to Charles Davidson (Channel Coast District Natural Resources Program Manager) in order to be officially received. This was done in order to accurately receive all comments in their entirety, ensuring that all comments were received appropriately and without the risk of paraphrasing.

Next Steps:

- Consider public comments
- Facilitate Technical Advisory Group (TAG) quarterly meetings
- Conduct Tribal consultation
- Project planning will continue with:
 - Finalization of Project Scope
 - Identifying project funding
 - Agency permitting

Comments Received:

NAME	COMMENT
ANA CITRIN	<p>Gaviota Coast Conservancy appreciates that State Parks is undertaking efforts to perform much needed restoration work in Gaviota Creek. Unfortunately due to the timing, we were not able to attend the December 30th workshop and missed important information needed to meaningfully comment on the proposed Gaviota Creek Estuary Restoration Project.</p> <p>From the information available, it appears that the current proposal would benefit from considerable strengthening to ensure its general efficacy and to improve ecosystem function and habitat for sensitive species like the endangered Steelhead trout and Tidewater goby.</p> <p>We would appreciate State Parks revising the proposal to address concerns already received, then holding an additional public workshop (outside of holiday periods). In addition, providing more detailed written information about the restoration proposal to the public in advance would greatly facilitate informed public comment.</p> <p>Thank you for considering these comments and we hope to have an opportunity to comment in more detail.</p>
VIRGINIA GARDINER	<p>I have some familiarity with Gaviota State Park and the estuary, having spent about a decade as the District Resource Ecologist for Channel Coast. The parks in Channel Coast, with the exception of the State Historic Parks, are all both blessed and plagued in location at the mouths of coastal creeks and rivers. This presents challenges that highlight the conflict inherent in the Parks mission - the natural/cultural resource protection elements are inevitably at odds with the recreation mission.</p> <p>As long as the Gaviota campground and day use occupy the floodplain and the upstream elevations in the willow woodland remain as they are, the problems of flooding and impaired function of the estuary will continue as they have. Relocation of the campground will only become a possibility through the General Plan update process, and will likely also need a Parks bond to fund. The update is long overdue for all three parks, but Gaviota, with its watershed in limited ownership that are likely to be amenable to cooperative restoration of the entire watershed, has the best potential for meaningful re-visioning of the campground location. I strongly urge Parks to focus your energy and attention there, with the General Plan update.</p> <p>My technical input on the restoration plan, based on painful experience, is that no planting done in the area downstream of the crossing will last for any length of time. It is a waste of Parks' limited resources to go through obtaining permits, growing or purchasing genetically appropriate native plants, and installing them and then having to meet performance standards that will simply require repeated replanting after each flood. The natives are in the seed bank and will recolonize on their own. The funds would be better spent focusing on eradicating as much of the invasives as possible from the estuary and as far up the watershed as you can. I hope the settlement agreement could accommodate this.</p> <p>Wishing you best of luck, and looking forward to how the General Plan update can renew and reimagine this magnificent park and estuary!</p>

**ERIN
MARKEY**

I have comments to submit about the proposed restoration project.

The proposed project does not do enough to address the larger issues of public infrastructure built within a historic estuary and active floodplain.

The proposed efforts of removing non native species and debris should be considered part of regular operation and maintenance efforts by State Parks as the stewards of this land. The scope of this effort is insufficient to address the real needs of the site, retreat or removal of the Park infrastructure for habitat creation/restoration. I understand a larger General Plan effort is underway but changes here are overdue and this feels like a drop in the bucket compared to what actually should be done.

Today is also the first time I am hearing of this plan. This feels like a very rushed public outreach and comment period, that is insufficient for such a critical habitat area, additionally when taking place over the holidays.

Thanks very much for your consideration.

**JEFF
KRUTHERS**

The so called "Restoration Project" doesn't really restore habitat that was agreed to. It does nothing to practically revive the estuary operationally, nor is there any improvement that could benefit the various species who live there and have lived there before inappropriate treatment of the habitat.

Gaviota Park is a major embarrassment to the state of California. Not only has the native flora and fauna been negatively impacted in a major degree, the park itself is in complete disrepair.

There are miles of lengthy and deep potholes. The damaged, once iconic, pier, at one time enjoyed by thousands, has been closed for over a decade. The fully operational boat hoist (enjoyed by divers, fishermen, surfers, etc.), also enjoyed by thousands, sits unused. Fishing from the pier once provided weekend relief, in particular to the residents of the Santa Barbara's north county.

I have used Gaviota Park since it was a country park, and it is humiliating what the state has allowed it to become. It is truly shameful and a disgrace.

The state seems to have millions of taxpayer dollars to wastefully unload on fanciful projects nearby. Why can't California decision makers preserve and protect what it already has? The taxpayers deserve nothing less.

**LISA
STRATTON**

Thank you very much,

Thank you for taking my comment at the presentation of the project on Dec. 30th for Gaviota State Park Estuary Restoration project for meeting the requirements of the settlement. As I said in my comment, my feeling is that what you are proposing is a deferred maintenance project that is likely to fail because the reason those upland weeds and Coyote brush are there, in what should be salt marsh, is that the elevations are too high. I think you need to remove about 1 to 1.5 feet of soil from under the core coyote brush/weed dominated portion of the salt marsh to make that whole peninsula actually function as a salt marsh and allow for flood overflow.

The proposed planting of riparian vegetation in the sand bars you indicated on your map

makes no sense because those are ephemeral structures and too low in elevation to support freshwater riparian trees. They are probably all blown out of there from the recent rains.

What really needs to happen is that the northern edge of the park (right bank of the stream downstream of the low bridge, and after the functioning riparian area that is maybe 25 feet in length) you need to lay back the bank, into the campsites there at 5:1 or less steep and plant it with riparian vegetation that will allow the stream to swell and shrink without scouring out the edge of the vertical bank. Then I think you need to make a cut to the south and remove all the fill dirt along the eastern edge of the parking lot and allow the stream to flow over the salt marsh there and spread out over it to keep things more dynamic until the final plan to move the main campground out of the estuary is finalized and you can really return ecological function to the estuary while maintaining some parking and public access.

**CANDICE
MENEHIN**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the process for developing, as well as the adequacy and completeness of the proposed Project Scope for the Gaviota Creek Estuary Restoration Project.

Coastal Ranches Conservancy (CRC) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization (Tax ID 68-0554135) that was founded in 2003 with the mission to support nature conservation, restoration, and education on the Gaviota Coast by working with landowners, public agencies, and other non-profit organizations. CRC was the Petitioner in the legal action that led to the restoration project and is a member of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) created pursuant to the settlement to implement the project.

On October 17, 2025, CRC offered comments on the Draft Project Scope, as a member of the TAG. None of these comments or considerations were incorporated into the finalization of the Project Scope shared with the public on December 30, 2025. Further, the project as proposed will not restore the estuary, and instead is a continuation of Parks' previous failed replanting project. Finally, as outlined in our prior letter, the project scope fails to meet the requirements of the settlement agreement.

1. Timing of Workshop for Meaningful Public Engagement

Parks has been aware of the obligations and timelines for public engagement and input on the Project Scope since May 2025. The TAG met on October 1, 2025, for a site visit at the estuary, where TAG members agreed to submit comments earlier by October 17, 2025, to accommodate forthcoming holidays and year end deadlines. CRC recognizes the furlough of federal employees from October 1-November 12, 2025, but there was still ample time to facilitate Army Corps, US Fish and Wildlife and NOAA-NMFS input and hold a public meeting before two major holidays. Good faith requires sincerity of intent, and while yes, Parks has complied by holding a meeting before the end of 2025, the choice of date is telling, deliberate, and obstructionist by preventing meaningful and quality participation by stakeholders. Many agencies (e.g., County of Santa Barbara) close between Christmas and New Year, to accommodate one of the busiest traveling periods in the country, when many people take vacation and are out of the office. The TAG was only notified of the workshop on December 18, 2025, less than two weeks before the scheduled meeting.

2. Material Availability Prior to the Workshop

Parks did not share the proposed Project Scope, TAG comment letters, settlement agreement, maps, current general plan zoning, or any other pertinent materials ahead of the workshop. It appears that the link for the workshop was only made available online sometime on December 29th, 2025, a day before the workshop. CRC informed Parks of its intent to support engagement at the Workshop by doing an email notification to its membership and requested a meeting link which was not forthcoming. Furthermore, by not making the materials available ahead of time, Parks added to confusion about whether attendance was needed and or warranted, further impacting engagement.

3. A Public Workshop Without Verbal Public Comments

Parks did not entertain verbal comments on the proposed Project Scope at the meeting but only allowed for questions from the public. It's somewhat preposterous to hold a public engagement workshop and not take commentary from the public. Workshops are meant to solve problems collaboratively, which is nearly impossible and futile without public commentary. Instead, Parks requested that comments be written and submitted by January 6, 2026, while many are still on vacation. Even allowing submissions through January 9, 2026, would be more accommodating given the date of the workshop.

4. Parks Incorrectly Punts Solutions for the Gaviota Creek Estuary to the General Plan Update

At the workshop, Parks asserted that the General Plan provides the required policy framework and programmatic CEQA evaluation for guiding future management at its parks. Parks further asserted that no real restoration at the estuary and in the park can proceed without a new General Plan and programmatic CEQA review. This is wrong as a matter of law and bad public policy.

Parks failed to implement the mitigation and restoration at the Park in the 1990's required by the Mitigated Negative Declaration issued for campground upgrades. As a result, the settlement agreement entered by Parks and CRC requires that the mitigation be implemented via an Updated Restoration Plan. The Settlement Agreement and the required Updated Restoration Plan require defined and substantial restoration in the estuary on an agreed schedule, independent of any General Plan updates. Delinking the General Plan update process and the Restoration Project was intentional, given that based on past experience any General Plan update will take decades. Parks apparently has the timing precisely backwards—the restoration must happen now, and any General Plan updates will be consistent with that restoration.

5. Proposed Project Scope Does Not Meet the Settlement Terms

The Settlement Agreement sets out the following obligations for the estuary restoration project:

Consistent with these facts, Parks shall implement an estuary restoration project ("Updated Restoration Project"), that is consistent with the following specifications: (1) restoration of 3.0 acres of coastal salt marsh, and (2) restoration of 1.0 acres of riparian habitat consistent with the following performance standards: (a) restoration work will take place on the bank of Gaviota Creek, in the area between the bridge and the estuary, along the right side (facing downstream) adjacent to the campground, and work may also take place on the left side, (b) restoration work will be designed to limit the impact on the

overnight experience for visitors to Gaviota State Park, acknowledging that restoration work may affect a very limited number of campsites. The Updated Restoration Project will be designed and implemented in consideration of the current environmental conditions at the site, and based upon the best available science. The Updated Restoration Project will enhance habitat for sensitive species, will improve ecological and hydrological function, and will support long-term access, facilities, and restoration planning.

(See Settlement Agreement, ¶ 7.2.)

Importantly, the Settlement Agreement incorporates by reference the terms of the 1991 Mitigated Negative Declaration (“MND”) and provides that “the 1991 MND shall serve as a reference point in the development of proposed wetland restoration.” Thus, Parks must consider the specific grading, replanting, and habitat restoration protocols outlined in the 1991 MND in developing the new restoration project.

The 1991 MND provides in relevant part:

“WETLAND RESTORATION. Two (2) acres of disturbed land will be restored to a salt marsh and 1.5 acres of existing salt marsh will be improved on the point bar adjacent to the campground and day-use areas. Approximately 5,000 cubic yards of material will be excavated to create wetland habitat at an elevation of 4.5-6.0 feet. Pickleweed, jaumea, salt grass, and alkali heath will be planted in the excavated area. Another 4,000 cubic yards will be excavated along the upper creek bank to create a riparian woodland. The excavated material will be used as fill in the rehabilitated campground. When restored the riparian woodland will act as a buffer between the creek and the campground. The width of this buffer will range from 50 feet to over 100 feet in width and extend 600 feet along the right bank of the creek.”

As currently scoped, invasive non-native plant species removal, with no fill removal or grading, does not restore either salt marsh or riparian habitat. As noted in the 1991 MND, significant fill material, on the order of 9,000 cubic yard, will need to be removed to restore tidal flows in the estuary. Without this restoration, the project cannot provide enhanced habitat for endangered Southern California steelhead or Tidewater Goby, and does not improve ecological and hydrological function on critical steelhead habitat.

Not including improvements for CESA listed species with instream habitat enhancements for goby and steelhead, will not mitigate impacts from the campground construction on these species, nor the temporal impact of mitigation not occurring for 30 years, and how that contributed to the limiting factors of their recovery. Excavation is required to meet the 4.5-6 feet elevation to support long term salt marsh restoration. Excavation also offers an opportunity to meet multiple species/fisheries needs. Gaviota Creek watershed still hosts a viable population of endangered Southern California steelhead.

Estuary improvements here will bolster steelhead recovery region wide and support recovery of the Distinct Population Segment as a whole.

As stated in our October 17, 2025 TAG comments (attached) the Proposed Project Scope:

1. Cannot be considered a restoration project or mitigation
2. Fails to consider listed species and designated critical habitat
3. Viable restoration approaches that align with state objectives exist

6. Repeating An Ill-Informed Concept

The 1992-93 Gaviota State Park reconstruction project was required to complete estuary and riparian restoration per a Restoration Plan, prepared by and agreed to by Parks. This notably required the removal of 7-10,000 cu. yds. of soil to create the conditions for salt marsh plants to become established. That soil was then to be used to raise the elevation of the campground and buildings by 3-4 feet to make the Park less susceptible to flooding. This excavation and grading work would have needed to be done prior to the Park reconstruction. It was not done, and the campsites and buildings were built at existing grade. The area east of the parking lot had been graded and scraped clean of all vegetation during the Park reconstruction. A contractor was hired to plant and maintain native plants and maintain. Drip irrigation was installed temporarily and school youth were brought out to help with the planting. Because no effort to remove historic fill and to restore natural tidal flows was attempted, the planting project failed and was abandoned within approximately two years.

Parks is now proposing virtually an identical project. For restoration of salt marsh conditions, it is well-established science that salt marsh plants will only grow in halophytic soils, as noted in the Public Workshop on December 30th, 2025 by both Dr. Lisa Stratton and CRC consultant, Stillwater Sciences' Ethan Bell. Excavation is required in the Gaviota Creek estuary to create those conditions, impacting critical steelhead habitat. An approach devoid of excavation, as is required by the best available science, is bound to fail in 2026/2027 as it did in the 1990's. Deferred maintenance and invasive non-native plant species removal is not equivalent to salt marsh restoration.

Conclusion

CRC hoped that settlement of its legal action compelling compliance with the terms of the 1992 MND, and the creation of the TAG, signaled a new, cooperative relationship between Parks, the resource agencies, and the public in implementing a restoration of the Gaviota Creek estuary. Instead, Parks now seeks to implement a patently inadequate project, to limit or eliminate meaningful public comment by scheduling workshops during holidays while limiting access to documents, and to marginalize the TAG Parks is committed to collaborate with.

CRC now requests that Parks course correct and undertakes to work with CRC and the TAG to design and implement a project that is consistent with the 1992 MND, and the Settlement Agreement, and will restore the salt marsh and riparian habitat in the estuary.

CRC asks that Parks respond to comments from the TAG and the public in writing, and that an additional workshop be conducted to modify the proposed scope. CRC remains hopeful that Parks will engage and that a compliant project can be agreed to. However, if Parks proceeds with the project as proposed, CRC intends to seek the guidance of the Court to ensure that the Project meets the requirements of the Settlement Agreement.

**LOUIS
TERNULLO**

Thank you for allowing me to attend your public workshop concerning the proposed Gaviota Creek restoration. As I am relatively new to creek restoration, your presentation was very educational. I and many others had questions and comments, but the un-mute button was not working. Here are my comments. As an observer without the benefit of dialogue it was very hard to understand why you put this proposal together instead of acting on the settlement agreement established some thirty years ago. Considerable resources and scientific research was done towards understanding the necessary steps towards a successful restoration. What you are proposing is more of a band-aid than a fix.

You must know that many creatures like Steelhead are critically endangered and saving them needs to happen now. Any delay at this point could cause this amazing fish to disappear from our area forever. Southern Steelhead are the hardiest and most tolerant of extremes than any other Steelhead. We just need to return our creeks to a more natural condition while removing barriers to their historic spawning grounds. This benefits all living things in the watershed. They have been here well before humans and are a vital part of our ecosystem. Complying with the existing settlement is the best option for solving this dilemma and it has already been agreed upon. It just needs to be implemented.

UNKNOWN

The proposed plan to just pull weeds is not acceptable. Too little effort. Please remove the fill dirt placed by your department so that native species could get re-established again. Thank you.