

Chapter 1

Purpose and Need for Action



Introduction

This Final Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (FEIS/EIR) has been prepared to assist the public, the National Park Service (Park Service), and the California State Lands Commission (CSLC) in formulating a wetlands restoration plan for the Waldo Giacomini Ranch (Giacomini Ranch) and Olema Marsh. Together, the Giacomini Ranch and Olema Marsh represent the Project Area for the Giacomini Wetland Restoration Project (hereinafter referred to as the proposed project).

This document has been prepared in accordance with both the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the 1970 California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The intent of both NEPA and its California counterpart, CEQA, is to help local, state, and/or federal agencies make informed decisions regarding the environmental impact of proposed actions. As required by NEPA and CEQA, this FEIS/EIR analyzes a full range of alternatives that could meet the objectives for the plan — that is to restore wetlands and to create public access opportunities within the Project Area — and presents a comparison of the probable impacts of implementing each.

The Project Area is located approximately 40 miles northwest of San Francisco in Marin County, California (Figure 1). The Giacomini Ranch lies at the southern end of Tomales Bay, a 6,800-acre, 12-mile-long, approximately 1-mile-wide estuarine embayment that runs along Point Reyes National Seashore (Seashore)'s northern perimeter (RWQCB 2001; Figure 2). The towns of Point Reyes Station and Inverness Park border the Project Area to the east and west, respectively. Lagunitas Creek, the largest subwatershed within Tomales Bay, bisects the Giacomini Ranch into the East and West Pastures. Olema Marsh is located directly south of the Giacomini Ranch at the downstream end of Bear Valley Creek before its confluence with Lagunitas Creek.

The Park Service is acting as the lead NEPA agency and principal project proponent and manager. The Park Service owns approximately 550 acres of the Giacomini Ranch (Figure 2). The portion of Lagunitas Creek in between the Giacomini Ranch's East and West Pastures and the undiked or unleveed tidal lands north of the Giacomini Ranch are owned by the CSLC and have the potential to be affected by the proposed project (Figure 2). CSLC has agreed to participate as the lead under CEQA. The Park Service also owns approximately 50 percent of Olema Marsh. Two of the five proposed alternatives involve restoration of the 63-acre Olema Marsh, which is also partially owned by the non-profit organization, Audubon Canyon Ranch. Audubon Canyon Ranch is actively working with the Park Service and CSLC on the proposed project. The Park Service and CSLC have also been working collaboratively with the County of Marin Public Works department and the County of Marin Parks and Open Space district, as well as the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, whose jurisdiction extends into the southern portion of Tomales Bay.

Excessive sedimentation in the Tomales Bay watershed during the late 1800s from logging and agricultural development resulted in large-scale conversion of subtidal and unvegetated intertidal aquatic habitats to vegetated intertidal marsh, nearly doubling wetland acreage in the bay. Many of these tidal marshes were subsequently disconnected by construction of berms or earthen "walls" for roads, railroads, livestock ponds, and duck clubs that isolated marshes both hydrologically and ecologically from Tomales Bay.

These hydrologic and topographic alterations not only often converted salt marsh to freshwater marsh or even upland or non-wetland habitats, but substantially reduced the functionality of these marshes in terms of storing floodwaters, dissipating the energy of flood flows, improving water quality, and supporting wildlife. The largest loss of hydrologically connected wetlands came with diking of approximately 550 acres for operation of the Waldo Giacomini dairy ranch and pastures in 1946. Since then, the Project Area has been subjected to numerous hydrologic and topographic changes or alterations to improve operation of the dairy, including construction and maintenance of levees, tidegates, and culverts to exclude tides and restrict creek flow; ditching and straightening of creeks; frequent dredging of ditches and creeks; spreading of manure; irrigation of pastures to improve forage; and grazing.



A large portion of Tomales Bay watershed lands were acquired by the Park Service in the 1960s and 1970s for establishment of two neighboring parks -- Point Reyes National Seashore (Seashore) and Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). In 1980, the boundary for GGNRA was expanded to include the Giacomini Ranch and the eastern portion of Tomales Bay. The Giacomini Ranch falls within the north district of the GGNRA, which is administered by the Seashore. For several decades, the Park Service discussed purchase of the ranch with the Giacomini family for the purposes of restoring the historic coastal marsh, however, funding did not become available until the early 1990s. The ranch was eventually acquired in February 2000 with a combination of Congressional appropriations and state monies. State funding was secured from the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), which transferred funds to the Park Service for purchase, planning, and implementation of a restoration project in exchange for the Park Service assuming wetland mitigation obligations for impacts associated with a repair of State Route 1 in the coastal portion of Marin County.

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While the Park Service is required under its agreement with CalTrans and regulatory agencies to mitigate only a small amount of wetlands, the purpose of the proposed project is to restore natural hydrologic and ecological processes and functions on a significant portion of the Project Area. Natural hydrologic processes include marine-influenced tidal action with the daily ebb and flood of tides and fluvial or creek action, which encompasses the seasonal cycle of freshwater flow, as well as overbank flooding onto floodplains and movement of the creek channel during storm events. These hydrologic processes drive important wetland functions that benefit both wildlife and humans such as floodwater storage, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge, food production, and wildlife habitat. The Park Service has developed a range of alternatives for the Giacomini Ranch and Olema Marsh that vary in the amount of levee or berm removal, removal or modification of hydrologic control structures such as culverts and tidegates, habitat enhancement and creation, and public access opportunities.

Restoration will not only improve natural resource conditions on the Giacomini Ranch, thereby increasing the value of resources on Park Service lands and contributing to fulfillment of the Park Service's mission of protection, conservation, and restoration of natural resources, including wetlands. It will also contribute to the health of the entire Tomales Bay watershed by increasing functionality of the Giacomini Ranch wetlands, supporting the Park Service's commitment to managing parks as part of an integrated landscape with other public and private lands (NPS 2006, Section 4.1.4). While perceived as pristine, Tomales Bay has been declared impaired under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act by the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) for excessive sediment, nutrients, pathogens, and mercury.

Two-thirds of the freshwater inflow — and potentially the principal sediment, nutrient, and pathogens source — to Tomales Bay flows through the Project Area (Fischer et al. 1996). By restoring natural hydrologic processes through removal of levees, tidegates, and culverts, floodwaters of Lagunitas Creek carrying sediment, nutrients, and other pollutants will be able to flood onto its historic floodplains to be filtered and transformed by the restored wetlands, thereby improving downstream water quality. These restored wetlands would not only benefit water quality and increase habitat and food resources for wildlife within the watershed, but would provide opportunities for public enjoyment and education through inclusion of public access trails, viewing overlooks and platforms, and interpretative exhibits.



Pacific Ocean and outer Tomales Bay



