

Technical Evaluation of Potential Public Access
Alignments for the Giacomini Wetland Restoration Project
Part II: Technical Feasibility Study

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

Point Reyes National Seashore (Seashore) is planning a wetlands restoration project for the former Giacomini Ranch in Tomales Bay, California (see Figure 1: Project Location). The Giacomini Ranch is located in the north district of Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), which is administered by the Seashore. The National Park Service (Park Service) acquired the Giacomini Ranch in February 2000 through a combination of Congressional appropriations and funding from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). The Park Service entered into an agreement with Caltrans and the California Coastal Commission that enabled Caltrans to transfer its mitigation obligations for 3.6 acres of wetlands to the Park Service in exchange for funding for acquisition and restoration. As part of the purchase agreement, the Giacomini family was granted a reservation of use agreement until 2007 on approximately 463 acres of the approximately 563-acre property. The remaining 100 acres are already under Park Service management.

Since purchase of the property in 2000, the Seashore has been moving forward with the environmental planning process. It has identified the state of California's State Lands Commission (SLC) as the lead agency for the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) portion of the planning process and is also cooperating with the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, which has jurisdiction within the southern portion of Tomales Bay. Baseline studies on existing wildlife, vegetation, wetland, and cultural resources have been or are being currently conducted. Through integration of this baseline information with restoration science tenets, Park Service directives and management policies, and mitigation and contractual obligations, the Seashore has identified a Project purpose and several goals, specifically:

1. The project should restore natural tidal and freshwater hydrologic processes in a significant portion of the Project Area, thereby promoting restoration of natural ecological processes and functions.
2. The Park Service will take a watershed-based approach to restoration such that it will emphasize opportunities to improve conditions within the entire Tomales Bay watershed, not just within the Project Area.
3. To the extent possible, the Park Service will explore both the potential for opportunities for the public to experience the restoration process as long as those opportunities do not conflict with the project's purpose and goals.

The Seashore and SLC conducted an initial public scoping in fall 2002/winter 2003 following issuance of the Notice of Intent and Notice of Preparation. Once scoping was completed, the Seashore started working with its hydrologic consultants (Kamman Hydrology & Engineering, Inc.) to develop a reasonable range of preliminary restoration and public access concepts. The five (5) preliminary concepts, which included a No Action or No Project alternative, were unveiled to adjacent landowners, members of the

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general public, regulatory agencies, organizations, and technical experts in the field of wetland restoration during a series of workshops held during 2004. Feedback and input received during these workshops were used to refine the preliminary restoration and public access concepts. This second public scoping session culminated with a workshop for the general public in June 2004, with written comments and/or petitions accepted through late July 2004. Following close of scoping, the Park Service and other lead and cooperating agency staff met to discuss possible changes to preliminary concepts based on the feedback and input received during the second or 2004 scoping period. The finalized alternatives will be incorporated into the environmental document, an Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR), which is scheduled to begin production in early 2005. A draft document is expected to be released to the public in fall 2005. The information in this document will be used for the preparation of the draft EIS/EIR.

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Figure 1: Project Location



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1.2 PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

The former Giacomini Ranch (Project Area) is located at the southern end of Tomales Bay at the mouth of Lagunitas Creek, the largest subwatershed within the Bay. Tomales Bay is an approximately 12-mile-long, one-mile-wide estuary that runs along the southern boundary of the Seashore. The Project Area is bordered by the town of Point Reyes Station to the east and Inverness Park to the west. During the 1860s, one-third to one-half of the Project Area was actually subtidal or intertidal, with most of the historic wetlands concentrated in the southeastern portion. Excessive sedimentation from logging and poor land use practices during the late 19th century and early 20th century caused an exponential increase in deltaic expansion of the existing wetlands, leading to the creation of as much as 650 acres of new salt marsh habitat between 1860 and 1950 (Josselyn and Bucholz 1983). Expansion of the delta created opportunities for agricultural expansion, as well. The first dairy was started on the property in 1917 (PWA et al 1993). Waldo Giacomini reclaimed the Project Area in 1946 and constructed levees along Lagunitas Creek. The Giacomini family has been operating the property as a dairy since that time.

Lagunitas Creek basically bisects the Project Area into two subareas: the East and West Pastures. Other drainages flowing through the Project Area and into Tomales Bay include Fish Hatchery Creek and several small drainages on the west and Tomasini Creek on the east. In addition, there are strong freshwater influences along the periphery of the Project Area from seeps along Inverness Ridge and Point Reyes Mesa. Because of the numerous drainages and seeps, the transition from Lagunitas Creek to the Inverness Ridge or Point Reyes Mesa represents more a saltwater to freshwater transition than a wetland to upland one and complicates efforts to develop paths or trails or other features (e.g., high tide refugia for wildlife) at the Project Area periphery. Tidal influence to most of the project area has been minimized, if not eliminated, by construction of approximately 7- to 10-foot-high levees. Muted tidal action is present in the northern portion of the project area because tidegates or flashboard dams have not been properly maintained. These facilities function as two-way tidegates/dams, allowing tidal waters to move up both Fish Hatchery and Tomasini Creek. Tomasini Creek has been bermed to flow along the edge of Point Reyes Mesa, thereby eliminating most of its influence from the Project Area. Fish Hatchery Creek has also been bermed to some degree.

These diverse hydrologic influences have resulted in extensive wetland development over much of the Project Area, although most of these wetlands are what might be termed "Wet Pasture" or actively managed fields dominated by non-native annual and perennial grasses. However, portions of the Project Area where a mosaic of riparian, marsh, and wet pasture is present were found to support a large number of common and special status wildlife species, particularly riparian breeding birds. This wildlife diversity is further enhanced by the proximity of habitats such as evergreen forest, coastal scrub, and undiked salt marsh that occur on the periphery of the Project Area. Several special status species specifically adapted to freshwater or brackish conditions were identified within the Project Area. California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) occurs primarily in

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a freshwater marsh in the West Pasture that is supported by a strong freshwater seep from Inverness Ridge. Tidewater goby (*Eucyclogobius newberryi*) was documented in Tomales Bay for the first time in almost 50 years in a section of Tomasini Creek within the Project Area. Northwestern pond turtles (FSC) have been sighted in various locations along old tidal sloughs, creeks, and drainage ditches within the Project Area. California clapper rails (federally endangered) and California black rails (California threatened) have occasionally been documented in the undiked tidal marsh north of the Giacomini Ranch's West Pasture.

While the Giacomini Ranch was private property until its purchase by the Park Service in 2000, members of the local community have established some informal public access paths along a limited portion of the West Pasture levee at its northern end and a limited portion of the East Pasture levee along its southern end. These paths are described in more detail in the Phase I report (KHE et al. 2004).

1.3 REQUIREMENTS AND PROCESS FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that federal agencies describe the Affected Environment or the existing environment of the Project Area or areas that will be affected by the proposed action or project, including areas downstream or upstream of the Project Area. It also requires an analysis of how the proposed action or project or, in the case of an EIS/EIR, the proposed alternatives, will affect the existing environment (Environmental Consequences). Both the restoration and public access components have the potential to affect the "human environment" through impacts to hydrologic, biological, and cultural resources, as well as potential land use impacts associated with public access infrastructure construction and public use. The environmental document must evaluate the potential for and degree of impacts resulting from these actions. The information in this Study document will be used for the preparation of the draft EIS/EIR document.

Public and agency scoping for the environmental document was completed in summer 2004, following a series of workshops at which the Park Service unveiled its preliminary restoration and public access concepts. During the initial public scoping held in fall/winter 2002-2003 after issuance of the Notice of Intent/Notice of Preparation, the Park Service received a number of comments regarding the potential for and appropriateness of public access as part of the wetland restoration project. At that time, a number of people called for creation of a public access path or trail that would connect the eastern and western portions of southern Tomales Bay and improve safety and access for both local residents and visitors. As a result, following the initial scoping, the Park Service incorporated a public access-related project goal and worked to develop public access components within the Project that would allow the public to experience and enjoy the restoration process without compromising the Project purpose and restoration-related goals. Park Service staff and its hydrologic consultants worked through a series of iterative meetings to develop and evaluate various potential restoration and public access

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components, using information collected during baseline studies as a guide to assess potential resource impacts.

Eventually, the Park Service settled on a total of four preliminary restoration and public access concepts, with three of the four alternatives incorporating a path from Point Reyes Station to Inverness Park with a bridge over Lagunitas Creek at the location of the old Giacomini summer dam. All of the alternatives included multiple viewing platforms/elevated overlooks and interpretative exhibits.

Once preliminary restoration and public access concepts were developed, the Park Service initiated a series of workshops with the public and agencies and solicited written feedback and input. During 2004, it received more than 80 letters or petitions and met individually with community and environmental groups and members of the local community. As before, most of the comments received concerned the appropriateness of and potential for public access as a part of the wetland restoration project. Those in favor of public access either expressed support for proposed access and/or infrastructure alignments, suggested changes to proposed alignments, or suggested possible other public access alignments that were not incorporated in the preliminary concepts.

1.4 TECHNICAL STUDIES OF PUBLIC ACCESS ALTERNATIVES

In response to the considerable public scrutiny of the public access portion of the Project, the Park Service decided to contract for a technical evaluation of the potential resource impacts associated with multiple potential public access alignments and infrastructure locations. This evaluation, which was prepared by the hydrologic consultant, Kamman Hydrology & Engineering, Inc. (San Rafael, Calif.) with technical assistance from its biological consultant subcontractor, LSA Associates (Richmond, Calif.), and the Park Service, focused specifically on hydrologic, cultural, and biological resources, as well as potential constraints to resource-related portions of the Project purpose and goals (Phase I report; KHE et al. 2004). The alignments and infrastructure locations included in the analysis came from suggestions received during public scoping, internal scoping, public access studies conducted in the past (West Marin Pathway Study; Wittenkeller & Associates and Copple Foreaker & Associates 1988), and other documents (e.g., draft County of Marin General Plan 2004). This study is finalized and has been posted on the Seashore's web site: www.nps.gov/pore under "Management Documents: Giacomini Wetland Restoration Project: Technical Evaluation of Potential Public Access Alignments for the Giacomini Wetland Restoration Project - Part I: Resources Study."

This technical evaluation recommended that the Park Service narrow its consideration of potential public access alignments and infrastructure locations to those that do not constrain or impinge upon the Project purpose and goals of restoring natural hydrologic and ecological processes and functions and that have the lowest potential environmental impacts. After review of the report, the Park Service has elected to carry forward those public access alignments and locations that were rated as having low to moderate environmental impacts for a second phase of study.