



Midpeninsula Regional  
Open Space District

R-13-17  
Meeting 13-02  
May 8, 2013

## AGENDA ITEM 5

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Tentative Approval of an Amendment to the Russian Ridge Use and Management Plan for Mindego Ranch, Acceptance as the Project Description for Purposes of Environmental Review Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and Award of Contract with Ascent Environmental for CEQA Environmental Review and Document Preparation

### GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Tentatively approve a Use and Management Plan Amendment for the Mindego Ranch Area of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve to allow habitat enhancements, conservation grazing, public access and regular maintenance and operations activities.
2. Direct staff to proceed with environmental review pursuant to the CEQA and accept the Use and Management Plan Amendment for the Mindego Ranch Area of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve as the CEQA project description.
3. Authorize the General Manager to enter into a professional services contract with Ascent Environmental for \$50,000 to provide consulting services pursuant to CEQA review in support of the Mindego Use and Management Plan project at Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve.

### SUMMARY

The Mindego Ranch Property (refer to Attachment 1, Property Map) was added as part of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve in 2008. A Preliminary Use and Management Plan maintaining status quo management was approved as part of the purchase (refer to Report R-08-38). Subsequently, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) conducted biological surveys that confirmed the existence of a significant population of San Francisco garter snakes (SFGS) on the property. Because of the biological sensitivity of this species and its endangered status which includes federal regulation of activities within its habitat, the District has conducted long-term planning to ensure that the District's future public access and land management objectives are fully consistent with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

District staff has worked closely with resource specialists to develop land management recommendations for the Mindego Ranch Area of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve (Mindego Ranch). The recommendations include activities that address habitat enhancements,

conservation grazing, public access, and routine maintenance and operations, and have been assembled into a proposed Use and Management Plan Amendment for Mindego Ranch, as described in this report. An underline/strikeout version of the Preliminary Use and Management Plan showing the proposed Amendment updates is provided as Attachment 5.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Mindego Ranch Use and Management Plan (U&M Plan) describes future land management, operations, and public access actions and activities at Mindego Ranch. The goal of the U&M Plan is to protect and enhance habitat for sensitive wildlife species, while responsibly integrating land management activities and limited public access at Mindego Ranch.

The proposed U&M Plan includes the following elements:

- Habitat Enhancement Actions;
- Conservation Grazing;
- Hiking and Equestrian Access to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) Donor Circle;
- Maintenance and Operations projects.

### **Habitat Enhancement Actions**

The District contracted with experts in the field of reptiles and amphibians (herpetologists) to perform in-depth surveys and recommend measures to protect and enhance populations of SFGS and other sensitive species on Mindego Ranch. The core habitat areas for these species will be designated as Conservation Management Units (CMUs), which are managed for resource protection rather than public recreation (refer to Attachment 2, Habitat Enhancement Map and 8, SFGS Habitat Management Plan). The experts recommended the District implement the following measures:

1. Eradicate non-native fish and control bullfrogs at Mindego Lake to improve SFGS's native prey base, primarily California red-legged frog (CRLF) and Pacific tree frog, as a long-term ecosystem benefit. This involves the following steps:
  - a. Temporarily drain Mindego Lake to eliminate non-native fish that prey upon larval CRLF.
  - b. Initiate a management program to eliminate the bullfrogs which are aggressive, introduced predators of the CRLF.
2. Increase capacity of smaller ponds that have partially filled in with sediment and are heavily colonized by aquatic vegetation. Loss of open water habitat has reduced overall habitat quality and impairs successful breeding by CRLF.
3. Install livestock exclusion fencing in select areas of all four ponds to manage livestock. This would allow cattle to drink at specific locations to help maintain open water habitat while excluding them from portions of the pond to ensure adequate growth of emergent and perimeter vegetation, consistent with CRLF protection.

### **Conservation Grazing**

Establishment of conservation grazing at Mindego Ranch is a cost-effective strategy to maintain ideal grassland-to-brush ratios for SFGS, control invasive weeds, reduce wildland fire fuel loads, maintain open water habitats in shallow ponds for CRLF, and promote native plant diversity. Significant infrastructure improvements as well as active management and monitoring are essential to meet the objectives of conservation grazing. A grazing assessment was prepared for the property by Sage Associates in 2008, and recommends low initial stocking rates and the following water system improvements (refer to Attachment 3, Grazing Infrastructure Map and 7, Grazing Plan):

- Install five new troughs at strategic locations to evenly distribute cattle across the property
- Install two new water tanks to provide livestock water throughout the dry months
- Install an electric (solar) pump to distribute the livestock water
- Install 8,000 feet of new, buried PVC water line to supply the water troughs

Mindego Ranch is partially within the drinking water watershed of Cuesta La Honda Guild (Guild watershed), which diverts water from Mindego Creek to supply drinking water to the Town of La Honda. A well-known potential threat posed by cattle grazing to downstream drinking water quality is the spread of *Cryptosporidium*, a pathogenic protozoan that causes intestinal infections that can be fatal to children and other sensitive populations. *Cryptosporidium* is spread via cysts produced in large quantities by newborn calves infected with the pathogen. Although highly unlikely at Mindego Ranch due to measures that are being proposed, contamination of the water supply with even trace levels of cysts could trigger the need for extremely costly water treatment procedures to be put in place.

To minimize the potential for contamination of the Guild's water supply, the following measures will be implemented as part of an adaptive management program:

- Cattle will be excluded from the Guild watershed during the wet season when drinking water is drawn from Mindego Creek.
- A barrier program will be implemented and monitored to ensure cattle are excluded from the Guild watershed during the wet season.
- Additional fence will be installed where existing barriers are ineffective.
- If cattle *Cryptosporidium* is detected in the Guild's water, the District will conduct testing of Mindego cattle for the presence of the pathogen.
- If the pathogen is present in the cattle herd, pastures within the Guild's watershed will be closed until additional water quality mitigation measures are established between the District and the Guild.

### **Public Access**

To minimize potential impacts to the highly sensitive SFGS, protective guidelines would be established and public access on the property would be limited. The U&M Plan includes following:

- Opening a new section of the Mindego Ranch main driveway that connects to the POST Donor Circle pathway to hiking and equestrian use
- Opening the POST Donor Circle pathway to hiking only
- Installing a horse stile at the entrance of the Donor Circle pathway
- Designating habitat buffer areas around ponds on Conservation Management Units, where no public access is allowed
- Install Closed Area signage at key locations
- Install new gate on the Mindego Ranch main driveway just beyond the junction with the Donor Circle pathway
- Allow for docent led tours within closed areas of Mindego Ranch

### **Maintenance and Operations**

Major maintenance and operations projects that would be implemented as part of the U&M Plan include road erosion treatment projects and assessment of existing structures. Additional maintenance activities are included in the San Francisco Bay Water Quality Control Board Landfill Closure Site Management Measures and the POST Council Circle Management Agreement.

Road Erosion Treatment Projects: Mindego Ranch Road and Trail Erosion Inventory (Best 2012), describes road erosion treatment projects and includes the following recommendations (refer to Attachment 4, Road and Trail Project Map and 6 Road and Trail Inventory):

- Installing reverse-grade dips and ditch relief culverts, rocking low-lying segments, and replacing a failing culvert along the main ranch driveway (recently renamed the Mindego Hill Trail; see Report R-12-37);
- Regrading, widening, and installing reverse-grade dips on three critical ranch access roads.

Existing Structures

- The potential historic significance of the Old True Residence (aka “Grandma’s House”) will be assessed as part of the environmental review process. Recommendations for this structure will be included in the final U&M Plan.

Landfill Closure: The San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board has approved closure-in-place for the Mindego Ranch landfill (refer to Attachment 9, Landfill Management Measures). The following site management measure would protect the landfill integrity:

- Implement a site-specific Stormwater Runoff Control Plan to divert surface runoff away from the filled area;
- Designate the filled area as a “closed area” and install signs to alert the public and District staff that the area is closed;
- Enforce the access restrictions and note the restrictions on District Preserve maps; and
- Inspect the site slopes following significant rain events to ensure that slope erosion is not occurring.

POST Council Circle Management Agreement: The agreement defines management activities and responsible parties for the POST Council Circle (refer to Attachment 10, POST Council Circle Management Plan). Key elements of the agreement include:

- POST may use the Council Circle as part of fundraising and donor recognition events for the purpose of open space preservation;
- Except as otherwise set forth in the agreement, POST shall be responsible for all repairs and maintenance of the Council Circle;
- District will annually perform routine maintenance on the trail leading to the Council Circle in a manner consistent with District holdings.

**Public/Stakeholder Consultation**

The proposed U&M Plan incorporates input from the following stakeholder groups:

- Trail users: representatives of the biking, equestrian and hiking communities (site visit held August 31, 2012);
- Agricultural community: the San Mateo County Farm Bureau (site visit held September 14, 2012, formal presentation given November 6, 2012);
- Watershed: the community of Cuesta La Honda Guild (site visit held November 6, 2012, attendance at Guild Board meetings held February 20 and April 17, 2013).
- Consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was initiated in October 2012. It is anticipated that a USFWS Recovery Permit including all proposed actions will be issued in late 2013.

The primary comment received by the representatives from the Farm Bureau related to potential conflicts between cattle and trail users. Mindego Ranch will be a pilot project to introduce and

educate users about cattle on District lands and provide an opportunity for the public to experience a working cattle ranch. East Bay Parks Regional Parks District has 40 years of experience with grazing cattle. They report that incidents involving aggressive cattle are often the result of interactions with off-leash dogs, and dogs will be prohibited at Mindego Ranch. Because of the small scale of public access and cattle grazing at the site, staff can respond quickly to make modifications to public access or grazing operations if needed.

Following the site visit held with the community of Cuesta La Honda Guild, the Guild provided comments on the U&M Plan expressing their concerns regarding the spread of *Cryptosporidium* as a result of a cattle operation on the Mindego Ranch. District staff attended the Guild's February and April board of directors meeting to discuss further mitigation measures, like the adaptive management program, to address the concerns regarding the cattle operation at Mindego Ranch.

#### **Award of Contract for Environmental Review**

A Request for Qualifications and Proposals (RFQP) to provide environmental services and prepare CEQA documents was released on March 25, 2013 via direct email and posting on the District website. The deadline for submission of proposals was April 12, 2013. A total of eight (8) proposals were received as shown below:

<b>Firm</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Cost Proposal</b>
Ascent Environmental	Sacramento	\$39,151
David J. Powers & Associates	San Jose	\$32,142
ESA	San Francisco	\$37,775
LSA	Berkeley	\$41,879
Raney	Sacramento	\$28,987
Strelow Consulting	Santa Cruz	\$30,740
Sustain Inc	Sacramento	\$39,151
Questa	Pt. Richmond	\$30,570

The proposals were carefully evaluated by staff to assess the qualifications of each proposer, including the overall team expertise, the implementation approach and the quality of the proposal. The top two firms deemed most qualified were Ascent Environmental and Strelow Consulting. Staff selected Ascent Environmental after conducting telephone interviews with both firms. Ascent was found to be the most technically qualified to address analysis and treatment of pathogens such as *Cryptosporidium*, both for purposes of the environmental analysis and for discussions with the Board and interested public. While Ascent has frequent and recent experience working with water treatment agencies and knowledge of this pathogen, Strelow Consulting lacks the expertise in this area and would have been required to hire a sub-consultant to address pathogen and water quality issues. By contrast, Ascent is also a full-service firm that employs all necessary technical staff for the project, including an architectural historian, further eliminating the need for hiring additional sub-consultants with unknown qualifications. In addition, Ascent has experience evaluating potential environmental impacts to SFGS on a similar project, which was the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the La Honda Creek Master Plan. Finally, Ascent has an excellent proven track record completing extremely complex projects with the District, including Environmental Impact Report preparation and support during the public meetings for the Mount Umunhum Public Access Project.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

The FY 2013-14 Budget adopted by the Board on March 13, 2013 (see report R-13-377) includes \$60,000 to complete the CEQA analysis and finalize the Mindego Use and Management Plan. The \$50,000 contract with Ascent, which includes additional historical assessment of a pre-1900 barn that was not anticipated at the time of the original RFPQ, is well within this budget. Implementation of individual elements of the U&M Plan will be approved by the Board separately.

## **BOARD COMMITTEE REVIEW**

The Planning and Natural Resources Committee (formerly the Use and Management Committee) met on November 13, 2012, and at that meeting reviewed and approved the above-described recommendations for the U&M Plan amendments.

## **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Property owners of land located adjacent to or within 300 feet of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve and interested parties have been mailed written notices of this proposed Tentative Approval of the U&M Plan Amendment. All legal notice requirements of the Brown Act have been met.

## **CEQA COMPLIANCE**

If the Board accepts the tentative U&M Plan Amendment as the project description for environmental review, District staff, assisted by a qualified environmental consultant, will complete an Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND). Following a public review period, the Board will consider all comments and deliberate on certification of the MND and final approval of the U&M Plan amendment.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Following the Board's tentative approval of the U&M Plan Amendment for the Mindego Ranch area of the Preserve, and award of contract to Ascent Environmental to complete a Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND), staff will work with Ascent to develop the draft environmental review document. Next, the IS/MND will be circulated for Board and public review. At the end of the CEQA public review period, staff will return to the Board to present public comment and provide a final recommendation on CEQA certification of the environmental review document and final approval of the U&M Plan amendment.

### Attachment(s)

1. [Mindego Ranch Location Map](#)
2. [Mindego Ranch SFGS Habitat Enhancement Projects Map](#)
3. [Mindego Ranch Grazing Infrastructure Map](#)
4. [Mindego Ranch Roads and Trails Map](#)
5. [Mindego Ranch Area of the Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve Use and Management Plan](#)
6. [Road and Trail Erosion Inventory: Mindego Ranch Area, Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve](#)
7. [Mindego Hill Ranch Grazing Management Plan](#)

8. [San Francisco Garter Snake Habitat Management Plan](#)
9. [Landfill Closure Site Management Measures San Francisco Bay Water Quality Control Board](#)
10. [POST Council Circle Management Agreement](#)

**\*Attachments can be found on the District website:**  
[http://www.openspace.org/about\\_us/meetings.asp](http://www.openspace.org/about_us/meetings.asp)

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