

Executive Summary

Summary Findings from Parks Forward Initiative Focus Groups

This document presents summary findings from seven focus group sessions conducted with California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) staff in August 2013. The purpose of the focus groups was to reflect on and share views on the status of State Parks, visions for a stronger future for State Parks, and the role of the Parks Forward Initiative (PFI). The focus groups were convened in different parts of the state and involved rank-and-file staff, managers and supervisors, and superintendents. Over 140 State Parks staff participated in the focus groups. Discussion topics focused on: what functions State Parks performs best (and which need the most improvement), hopes and fears around the PFI, what is working and not working about how State Parks is operated financially, what is working and not working in State Parks' personnel processes, and visions of a more successful future State Parks.

The following key themes emerged across the focus groups:

- **Adequate Funding.** Focus group participants believed that State Parks lacks adequate funding to fulfill its mission, and that this lack of financial resources has led to extensive deferred maintenance logs and a reduction in important services to the public such as interpretive programs and natural resource protection. Participants noted that funding for State Parks has been reduced significantly over the past 20-30 years without a reduction in properties or facilities, and that staff are continually asked to do “more with less.”
- **Budgeting and Allocation of Existing Funds.** Focus group participants expressed that State Parks needs to greatly improve how it budgets and allocates its financial resources. Participants noted that most department staff do not have a clear understanding of how budgeting works at State Parks, and that there should be closer alignment between the priorities of the department and allocation of funds.
- **Communication between Headquarters and Field Offices.** Focus group participants recognized that a lack of meaningful communication between staff based in headquarters and those in field offices has created an internal divide that hinders the department's ability to operate efficiently. Participants noted that this lack of effective communication has had negative implications for a number of critical functions within State Parks, including budgeting and personnel management. Focus group participants believed that improved communication and relationships would help foster an environment of collaboration and joint problem solving across the department.
- **Restoring Public Trust and Improving Employee Morale.** Focus group participants believed that the department's recent accounting problems, which were highly publicized and sometimes misrepresented in the media, had significantly eroded both public trust and employee morale. Focus group participants identified additional factors contributing to the historically low employee morale, including lack of funding, the department being understaffed, employees feeling overwhelmed, and crumbling facilities. Participants advocated for State Parks to regain the trust of both the public and department staff through improved transparency and by creating more opportunities for dialogue.
- **Greater Efficiency and Flexibility.** Focus group participants expressed frustration with several State Parks processes and policies deemed to be cumbersome and inefficient, including those involving purchasing, hiring, testing, contracting, timesheets and accounting. Participants want State Parks to be operated more efficiently, and they envision removing rigid requirements and adding flexibility as important parts of this transformation.
- **Broader Opportunities for Promotion.** While participants agreed that law enforcement is an important aspect of managing parks, many expressed frustration with the department's promotion policy, which requires that park superintendents be trained law enforcement officers. They stated that the policy prohibits State Parks staff with other skills from promoting to the superintendent level and that the department would benefit from having a broader diversity of skills in the ranks of its leaders.
- **Staff Passion.** Focus group participants expressed a strong passion for State Parks and its mission, and recognized this as a significant asset for the department. Many expressed the hope that the department will continue to support this mission while pursuing financial sustainability.