

MONTAÑA DE ORO PARK COULD INCREASE BY 65 PERCENT **Pumping up Montana de Oro: Plan would grow park by 65 percent** **Plan nears reality to add 5,500 acres and build trail from Los Osos to Avila Beach**

By David Sneed

State Parks is working with three conservation groups to finalize a series of land acquisitions that would add about 5,500 acres to Montaña de Oro State Park and allow the construction of a 20-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail, linking Los Osos with Avila Beach.

The additions would come in the form of three large parcels and 10 smaller ones scattered throughout the Irish Hills, a rugged mountain range west of San Luis Obispo.

If successful, the acquisition effort would cause Montaña de Oro to grow by about 65 percent, for a total of about 14,000 acres.

“That would be a very substantial addition and would make Montaña de Oro one of the largest state parks,” said Nick Franco, the department’s superintendent of the San Luis Obispo County district.

The planned acquisitions involve property that stretches about five and a half miles north and west from Avila Beach. They are:

- The 2,400-acre Avila Ranch centered on Wild Cherry Canyon between Avila Beach and Port San Luis. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. owns the property, but the utility leased the development rights on the land for 198 years. About 160 years remain on the lease, and the deal would involve purchasing those leases for \$24 million.
- The 1,500-acre Hibberd Preserve owned by the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County.

A proposal to add several small parcels and three large properties — the Andre parcel, the Hibberd Preserve and the Avila Ranch — could add some 5,500 acres to Montaña de Oro State Park.

The group is willing to donate the land to State Parks.

- **A parcel of 730 acres owned by the Andre family**, which would be purchased for \$1.825 million. The family has also agreed to place a conservation easement on other property in the area.
- **Ten parcels that make up 1,279 acres** owned by The Nature Conservancy, which would be purchased for \$3.842 million.

The first test of the acquisition plan will come Friday, when the state Public Works Board will meet in the State Capitol at 10 a. m. to consider spending nearly \$5.7 million to purchase the Andre and Nature Conservancy properties.

The money for these two purchases would come from a state account of \$13 million earmarked specifically for land acquisitions in the Irish Hills, said David Wrightsman, Irish Hills project manager with State Parks.

This money was allocated as part of Proposition 12, the voter-approved Parks Bond Act of 2000.

This leaves about \$7 million available for the second round of purchases, most notably the Avila Ranch leases.

The American Land Conservancy could make up the remainder of the \$24 million purchase price from other state sources as well as a private fundraising effort currently under way.



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

The view from the Wild Cherry Canyon property shows Avila Beach, Shell Beach and Pismo Beach

The state Coastal Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Board, Caltrans and other state agencies are interested in participating in the Irish Hills project, Wrightsman said.

He expects to take his funding requests to these agencies later this year.

“Altogether we should have the money we need to make the entire purchase,” he said. “If any coastal land deserves protection, this is it.”

Kara Blakeslee agrees that there is enough public and private money available to complete the deal. She is the Avila Ranch project manager with the American Land Conservancy.

While the competition for conservation dollars is fierce, she thinks the Irish Hills project is a rare opportunity to protect coastal lands.

She has already lined up funding from the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments and the state Transportation Commission and a donation of \$150,000 from the Hind Foundation.

“I’m pretty confident we can do it,” she said. “The opportunity to make all of this work is here and now.”

Blakeslee is the wife of Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee, R San Luis Obispo, and a former employee of American Land Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy. Now a financial planner in San Luis Obispo, she is volunteering one day a week to work on the Avila Ranch project.

This is not the first time conservationists have tried to purchase the development rights to the Avila Ranch, also known as the Leucadia Ranch.

A previous attempt by The Nature Conservancy to buy the rights from Nipomo developer Denis Sullivan and two partners collapsed in 2003.

Neither The Nature Conservancy nor Sullivan would comment on the current preservation effort.

The least-complicated piece of this conservation puzzle is the Hibberd Preserve. It has been owned by the Land Conservancy since 1999. The group is donating the parcel but is looking for a donation of \$50,000 to \$80,000 to defray its costs.

“It’s really always been our intention and understanding that it would become part of the state park,” said Bob Hill, the group’s conservation director. “We’re looking make a gift to the state, but we’d like to recover some of the property taxes and other expenses we’ve incurred over the years.”

If the current effort is successful, the deals could be finalized by the end of the year and the property transferred to State Parks by springtime, Franco said. He envisions open-space preservation; hiking and low-impact camping would be the main uses of the new parkland.

Much of the land is interlaced with trails for off-road vehicles and dirt roads that are ready-made for hiking.

A 20-mile segment of the California Coastal Trail linking the back country of Montaña de Oro with Avila Beach would be laid out and constructed later, Franco said.

The lower elevation of the property is rolling oak woodlands, while the upper elevations are more rugged and covered with chaparral. The highest point is a peak called Bald Knob at 1,286 feet.

Anytime property is added to State Parks, a question can arise of whether the department can afford to manage and maintain the new land.

For example, Harmony Headlands State Park near Harmony has not opened to the public since its acquisition in 2003 because the department does not have the \$1 million it needs to create a parking lot and other needed amenities.

It would be much easier to open the new Montaña de Oro lands, Franco said. The property already has a ready-made trail system.

“We would have to create a staging area without opening the park to cars, but those are not high-cost items,” Franco said.

Another possibility would be to charge a day-use fee to enter the new parkland.

The state Legislature prefers that parks pay for themselves with fees, but a decision like that would be made only after the property is acquired.

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