

**COUNTY OF SAN MATEO  
PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT**

**DATE:** October 8, 2014

**TO:** Planning Commission

**FROM:** Planning Staff

**SUBJECT:** EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Consideration of a Coastal Development Permit to allow the removal of 64 trees and the trimming of 56 trees in the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve (for the purpose of removing hazards from tree failure and improving the biological habitat of the Monterey cypress grove) located in the unincorporated Moss Beach area of San Mateo County. The project is appealable to the California Coastal Commission.

County File Number: PLN 2014-00211 (County Parks Department)

**PROPOSAL**

The San Mateo County Parks Department (County Parks) proposes to remove a total of 64 trees (34 of which are dead) and trim 56 trees within a 12.3-acre northerly section of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve (Reserve).

The purpose of the activity is to remove both dead and some live trees, as well as trim trees whose conditions pose public safety risks (from dropping limbs or tree failures along or near public accessible trails) to Reserve visitors, and to improve the overall health of the cypress grove. County Parks' goal is to maintain the iconic cypress grove character while improving public safety and the health of the grove.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Approve the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for County File Number PLN 2014-00211, by making the required findings and adopting the conditions of approval listed in Attachment A.

**SUMMARY**

As a County agency, the Parks Department is typically exempt from local zoning regulations; however, a CDP in compliance with the Local Coastal Program (LCP), which includes the County's Zoning District Regulations as part of its implementation plan, is required. Staff has completed a review of the project and all submitted documents and reports against the applicable LCP policies. Based upon that review and the recommendations of the applicant's Biological Resources Assessment excerpt

(as applies to the tree activity in the Assessment Area), the project has been found to be consistent with LCP policies relative to Sensitive Habitats (no significant impacts to San Vicente Creek riparian habitat, coastal sea bluffs, or select endangered wildlife species and nesting birds), Visual Resources, and Recreation/Visitor Serving Facilities (which acknowledge and mandate the maintenance of public recreational facilities, which would include trails and vegetation management).

The project complies with all applicable Resource Management-Coastal Zone (RM-CZ) Development Review Criteria, including Environmental Quality, Primary Scenic Resources, Primary Fish and Wildlife Habitat Areas, Primary Natural Vegetative Areas Criteria.

The project is categorically exempt pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), since the tree maintenance activities are considered maintenance of an existing public facility, as well as Section 15308 (Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment), since the tree maintenance activity's purpose is to also improve the health of the cypress grove.

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**COUNTY OF SAN MATEO  
PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT**

**DATE:** October 8, 2014

**TO:** Planning Commission

**FROM:** Planning Staff

**SUBJECT:** Consideration of a Coastal Development Permit, pursuant to Section 6328 of the County Zoning Regulations, to allow the removal of 64 trees and the trimming of 56 trees within a 12.3-acre area of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve (for the purpose of removing hazards from tree failure and improving the biological habitat of the Monterey cypress grove) located approximately 7 miles north of Half Moon Bay in the unincorporated Moss Beach area of San Mateo County. The project is appealable to the California Coastal Commission.

County File Number: PLN 2014-00211 (County Parks Department)

**PROPOSAL**

The San Mateo County Parks Department (County Parks) proposes to remove a total of 64 trees (34 of which are dead) and trim 56 trees within a 12.3-acre section of the northern uplands area (Attachment C) of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve (Reserve), with the total being broken down as follows:

34 Dead Trees

5 Live Trees (< 38" circumference) to be trimmed

30 Live Trees (> 38" circumference) to be removed

51 Live Trees (> 38" circumference) to be trimmed

**64 Total Trees to be removed**

**56 Total Trees to be trimmed**

Of the trees being removed or trimmed, 19 are blue gum eucalyptus trees (all of which are to be removed), with the remainder being Monterey cypress trees.

The purpose of the activity is to remove both dead and some live trees, and trim trees whose conditions pose public safety risks (from dropping limbs or tree failures along or near public accessible trails) to Reserve visitors (see Attachment F), as well as to improve the overall health of the cypress grove (by increasing light levels to improve conditions for existing trees, future tree re-plantings and establishment of groundcover species; although this project does not include any new tree planting or ground cover.

County Parks' goal is to maintain the iconic cypress grove character, improve public safety and the health of the grove and remove several blue gum eucalyptus trees, considered an invasive tree species. See Attachment D ("Cypress Grove Pilot Project Assessment Overview") for a complete description, including specific project objectives.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Approve the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for County File Number PLN 2014-00211, by making the required findings and adopting the conditions of approval listed in Attachment A.

## **BACKGROUND**

Report Prepared By: Dave Holbrook, Project Planner, Telephone 650/363-1837

Applicant/Owner: San Mateo County Parks Department

Location: Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, Moss Beach

APN: 037-101-260, -280; 037-192-030; 037-193-010; 037-194-010, -040; 037-195-030; 037-196-100

Size: Fitzgerald Marine Reserve: 402 acres; Project (Assessment) Area: 12.3 acres

Existing Zoning: RM-CZ/DR/CD (Resource Management-Coastal Zone/Design Review/Coastal Development)

General Plan Designation: General Open Space

Sphere-of-Influence: None

Existing Land Use: Public Recreation, Parking Facilities and Improved Trails

Water Supply/Sewage Disposal: N/A

Flood Zone: FEMA Flood Zone X (area of minimal flooding), Community Panel Map No.: 06081C0119E, effective October 10, 2012.

Environmental Evaluation: California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Categorical Exemption, Sections 15301 (Class 1; Existing Facilities); and 15308 (Class 8; Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment).

Setting: The 402-acre Reserve is under joint custodianship of the San Mateo County Parks Department and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Inter-tidal and sub-tidal marine habitats are the Reserve's dominant habitat types, but the Reserve also includes 32 acres of upland habitat and trails, which includes the 12.3-acre project Assessment Area within which the tree removal/trimming is proposed. This area is

bordered to the north by San Vicente Creek and to the west by the Pacific Ocean and bluffs.

The Assessment Area is distinguished by a grove of Monterey cypress that was first established about 90 years ago and has spread since then. To the north and south of this grove, the Reserve is a broad band of shoreline with intermittent beaches and coastal bluffs. A small visitor center/office and parking area are located on North Lake Street and San Vicente Creek. As cited in the Cypress Grove Arborist Hazard Assessment and Strategy (July 2014), "The cypress grove has become an iconic landscape that is beloved by the community and Reserve visitors."

Chronology:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Action</u>
December 5, 2013	- County Parks and Recreation Commission public meeting on Cypress Forest Management and San Vicente Creek Enhancement Projects (the latter is not part of this project). Attendees include MCCC Chairperson.
January 24, 2014	- Public Field Workshop on Cypress Forest Management and San Vicente Creek Enhancement (SVCE) Projects. Written comment period until February 3, 2014.
May 22, 2014	- Public Workshop at Cypress Meadows (Moss Beach) on first phase pilot projects of Cypress Forest Management and SVCE Projects. There was public consensus to proceed with CDP permitting for the first phase of both projects.
June 5, 2014	- County Parks and Recreation Commission public meeting; no public concerns are raised about either project.
June 18, 2014	- Subject CDP application submitted.
June 26, 2014	- Application deemed complete.

**DISCUSSION**

A. KEY ISSUES

1. Conformance with the Resource Management-Coastal Zone (RM-CZ) Zoning Regulations

The lands that encompass the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve are zoned RM-CZ (Attachment B). Pursuant to RM Regulations (Chapter 36, Section 6903), tree removal falls under its definition of "development." As such, the project

is reviewed against the applicable Development Review Criteria (Chapter 20A.2), including:

- a. Environmental Quality Criteria stipulate that: (1) the use of pesticides (or herbicides, as is proposed to be applied to the stumps of the cut eucalyptus trees) will not have any persistent adverse effects upon the environment, and (2) the tree removal will not have a significant adverse environmental impact upon primary wildlife or marine resources. Application of the herbicide will be done by a licensed professional in a manner that will have no broader impacts than preventing the tree trunk's regrowth through new sprouts. Section 2.a of this report (LCP - *Sensitive Habitats*) discusses the care that will be taken with listed wildlife species and birds prior to tree trimming and removal to ensure that no significant adverse impacts occur. Additionally, the tree removal activity would not occur near the marine bluffs to the west, and since tree stumps will not be removed, no soil disturbance or resultant erosion that could affect any marine resources will occur.
- b. Primary Scenic Resources Criteria stipulate that public views within and from Scenic Corridors (Fitzgerald Marine Reserve is located within the Cabrillo Highway County Scenic Corridor) shall be protected and enhanced, and development (subject tree trimming and removal) shall not be allowed to significantly obscure, detract from, or adversely affect the quality of these views. The subject tree activity affects a relatively small number of trees relative to the dense forest canopy that constitutes portions of the Reserve. The proposed activity will not affect scenic views looking westward from Cabrillo Highway, nor will it affect any views from the shoreline looking up and eastward, since the tree activity is well set back from the bluff edge. While the tree activity will open up some views as seen along the trails within the Reserve, the overall impact would significantly detract from views of any scenic area or landscape.
- c. Primary Fish and Wildlife Habitat Areas Criteria stipulate that there be no significant reduction of primary habitat areas nor should any nesting areas be adversely affected. The Reserve includes within its boundaries such wildlife habitat areas. The discussion in Section 2.a of this report relative to the tree activity's impacts to listed wildlife species and birds cites the pre-activity surveys and measures that will be taken to ensure that no significant impacts occur. This criteria also states that public access to primary wildlife habitat areas shall be controlled to allow for compatible recreational use, without over-utilization and disturbance to wildlife populations. The trails within the Reserve constitute such controlled public access, and the proposed tree activity along those trails will not result in a disturbance to wildlife as discussed in this report.

- d. Primary Natural Vegetative Areas Criteria stipulate that significant reduction of vegetation shall be prohibited. The proposed tree activity, as described and discussed in this report, does not represent a “significant reduction” of vegetation, but the select removal and trimming of a relatively small number of trees to reduce risks along the trails and to promote the overall health of the cypress grove.

2. Conformance with the Local Coastal Program

A Coastal Development Permit (CDP) is required, pursuant to San Mateo County Local Coastal Program (LCP) Policy 2.1, which requires that government agencies wishing to undertake development (which the subject tree removal/trimming activity is considered) in the Coastal Zone to obtain a CDP. Development includes all publicly financed recreational facilities (Policy 2.2), of which the County’s Fitzgerald Marine Reserve is considered. Staff has completed a Coastal Development Checklist for this project. Based on this review, staff has summarized below the following LCP policies applicable and relevant to this project:

a. Sensitive Habitats Component

Pursuant to Policy 7.1 (*Definition of Sensitive Habitat*), San Vicente Creek, located at the north end of the project area, and the ocean shoreline, coastal tidelands and bluffs adjacent and to the west, are considered sensitive habitats. The creek includes a riparian corridor and, pursuant to Policy 7.22, the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve is a designated marine and estuarine habitat.

Relative to the creek, a buffer zone is mandated from the edge of the riparian corridor (Policy 7.18). Pursuant to Policy 7.19 (*Uses in Buffer Zones*), public trails are permitted. The tree activity proposed within the San Vicente Creek buffer zone (see Attachment C) involves the removal of three trees (one of which is dead) and the trimming of three trees. Relative to the marine habitat and sea bluffs to the west, the existing trails are permitted under Policies 7.23 and 7.30 (*Permitted Uses*). Relative to the sea bluffs, the proposed tree removal and trimming along designated trails occur away and inland from the bluff tops. As such, maintenance of all such trails within the Assessment Area, including the management of trees and vegetation along such trails, is an allowable activity.

Policy 7.52 (*Weedy, Undesirable Plants - Public Agency Requirements*) requires public agencies (i.e., County Parks), where feasible, to remove undesirable plants from their lands. The blue gum eucalyptus is considered an invasive tree. Policy 7.51 (albeit directed to private landowners) supports the removal of blue gum eucalyptus seedlings.

While the LCP's "Recreation/Visitor Serving Facilities Component" includes policies specific to the maintenance of such facilities, the tree removal and trimming activities proposed within the Assessment Area pose issues both to habitat within or near buffer zones, as well as to wildlife habitat as associated with the dense tree canopy that comprises the entire Assessment area.

The applicant's submitted excerpt from the Cypress Forest Management Plan (Attachment E) states that sensitive habitats within the Assessment Area are generally limited to the San Vicente Creek Riparian Corridor Buffer Zone, and the remote potential that one or more species known or suspected to occur along the creek corridor could disperse further upland into the cypress grove. Raptors and other birds may nest in the tree cover in the Assessment Area, and their nests would be protected when in active use, typically from February through August. The 2010 Biological Resource Assessment and the 2010 Section 7 Biological Assessment, prepared as part of the CDP application for the prior Coastal Trail Improvement Project, concluded that no special-status plant species are known or suspected to occur within the Assessment Area. However, several special-status animal species are known or suspected to occur in the vicinity of the Assessment Area, and must be considered in such management activities to ensure no inadvertent take occurs during construction and maintenance activities. These consist of the following species:

California Red-Legged Frog. The California red-legged frog (CRF) is a federally listed threatened species and recognized as a Species of Special Concern by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). The Assessment Area is not within designated Critical Habitat for this species, but individual frogs are known to inhabit a pond immediately upstream and are referenced in the Coastal Trail Conditions of Approval. Although no suitable breeding habitat is present along the San Vicente Creek corridor in the Assessment Area, individual frogs could disperse and forage in the area, and would be susceptible to inadvertent take during removal and treatment of trees and invasive species if present in the Assessment Area, and suitable precautions should be taken.

San Francisco Garter Snake. The San Francisco garter snake (SFGS) is listed as both a state and federal endangered species, and a California fully-protected species. Critical Habitat has not been designated for this species, and no records have been reported for the San Vicente Creek watershed. Well-developed stands of freshwater marsh with abundant CRF, which serve as prey, are typically the preferred habitat for the SFGS, but individuals are known to disperse along creek channels and adjacent riparian and grassland habitat. As



with the CRF, there is a remote possibility that individual snakes could disperse into the upland areas of the cypress grove where they would be susceptible to inadvertent take during tree removal, tree pruning, and treatment of invasive species, if present in the vicinity of construction activities in the Assessment Area.

San Francisco Dusky-Footed Woodrat. The San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat is recognized as a Species of Special Concern by the CDFW. No characteristic nests of this species were observed during surveys of the Assessment Area, but suitable habitat is present within the dense riparian scrub along the San Vicente Creek corridor, and new nests could be established in the future. This species is generally nocturnal, but protection of conspicuous nest structures should be provided if encountered during construction activities in the Assessment Area.

Nesting Raptors and Birds Protected Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Monterey cypress trees, blue gum eucalyptus, willow forest, and larger shrubs provide suitable substrate for nesting birds, which are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Nests of raptors are also protected under provisions in the State Fish and Wildlife Code, when in active use. Removal and management of mature trees and invasive vegetation must be carefully timed to prevent inadvertent disturbance and possible abandonment of bird nests when in active use, typically from February through August. Preconstruction surveys shall be performed by a qualified biologist to confirm absence of any nests in active use if tree removal and trimming are to occur during the nesting season.

Roosting Bats. A number of bat species recognized as Species of Special Concern by the CDFW have a remote potential for occurrence in the mature trees in the Assessment Area. Removal of mature trees must be performed in a manner that prevents inadvertent disturbance to roosting bats, if present. Preconstruction surveys shall be performed by a qualified biologist to confirm absence of any roosting bats for trees containing suitable roosting conditions.

Tree removal will not involve the removal of the root balls; trees would be cut as flush to the ground as possible, thus no ground disturbance would occur. A licensed contractor will apply an herbicide solution to all eucalyptus tree stumps immediately after tree removal. Additionally, pursuant to the precautionary measures cited above, County Parks will have a biologist survey done prior to and during all tree removal and trimming. With such measures added as conditions of approval (Attachment A), staff concludes that the project would not create a significant impact to any sensitive habits as discussed and would be consistent with Policies 7.5 (*General Policies - Permit*

*Conditions*) and 7.34 (*Rare and Endangered Species - Permit Conditions*), specific to the requirement that a biologist conduct and report on the cited surveys of select wildlife.

b. Recreation/Visitor Serving Facilities Component

Fitzgerald Marine Reserve is considered a permitted use pursuant to Policy 11.3 (*Definition of Public Recreation Facilities*) and Policy 1.4 (*Recreation and Visitor Serving Facilities Permitted in the Coastal Zone*). Relative to the existence and proximity of sensitive habitats as discussed in the previous component, Policy 11.12 permits recreation facilities to locate adjacent to sensitive habitat only when development standards and management practices (which this project is considered) are adequate to protect such resources.

The project is consistent with Policy 11.18 (*Sensitive Habitats*), which requires that studies be conducted by a qualified person who shall consider the appropriate intensity of use, improvements and management to protect the resources and reduce or mitigate impacts. The previously cited 2010 Biological Resource Assessment addressed these issues relative to the proposed tree activity in the Assessment Area.

Relative to the role of San Mateo County, the project is consistent with Policy 11.27 (*Improvement, expansion and Maintenance of Public Recreation*), subsection (a), which seeks to continue to provide for the improvement and maintenance of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve.

c. Visual Resources Component

Relative to Policies 8.4 (*Cliffs and Dunes*) and 8.5 (*Location of Development*), the proposed tree maintenance activity (very sparse relative to the density of the tree canopy) would not affect the vegetative/canopy screen as seen from the beach looking eastward.

Regarding Policy 8.9 (*Natural Features/Vegetative Forms - Trees*), subsection (a) seeks to minimize tree removal; (c) employs the Heritage Tree Ordinance regulations; and (f) prohibits the removal of living trees with a trunk circumference of more than 55 inches, except as otherwise permitted under LCP policies. The "Cypress Grove Pilot Project Assessment Overview" (Attachment D) includes (under the "Summary of Proposed Work" section) a thorough assessment of trees within the Assessment Area, where the project arborist assigned priority ratings to each tree with consideration to the maintenance need, the potential hazard, and the area that would be impacted if the tree were to fail. With special consideration given to the goal of removing blue gum eucalyptus trees (invasive to the area), the total

number of trees to be removed and trimmed was determined. As such, the number of trees affected would be minimized.

d. Shoreline Access Component

Pursuant to Policy 10.1 (*Permit Conditions for Shoreline Access*), some provision for shoreline access is required as a condition of granting development permits for any public (or private) development between the sea and nearest road. While the Reserve meets the locational criteria, the nature and purpose of the Reserve is to, in fact, provide such access to the shoreline, through a network of trails leading through the Reserve directly down to the shoreline. The proposed tree activity will not affect or prevent access down to the shoreline from the Reserve's two primary access points, that being the Seal Cove stairway and at the main entrance from the parking area. The tree activity will affect the trail along the upper bluff, which would be closed to public access for a period of one to two weeks, depending upon the scope of work contract that County Parks is still preparing.

B. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The project is categorically exempt per the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Sections 15301 (Class 1; Existing Facilities), since the tree maintenance activities are considered maintenance of an existing public (County) facility (the Reserve). The project also qualifies under the categorical exemption, Section 15308 (Class 8; Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment), since the tree maintenance activity's purpose is to also improve the health of the cypress grove.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Recommended Findings and Conditions of Approval
- B. Fitzgerald Marine Reserve and Zoning
- C. Site Plan/Assessment Area
- D. Cypress Grove Pilot Project Assessment Overview
- E. Excerpted Section from Cypress Forest Management Plan
- F. Cypress Grove Project - Photos

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County of San Mateo  
Planning and Building Department

**RECOMMENDED FINDINGS AND CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**

Permit or Project File Number: PLN 2014-00211

Hearing Date: October 8, 2014

Prepared By: David Holbrook  
Project Planner

For Adoption By: Planning Commission

**RECOMMENDED FINDINGS**

Regarding the Environmental Review, Find:

1. That the project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to Section 15301 (Class 1; Existing Facilities), since the tree maintenance activities are considered maintenance of an existing public (County) facility (the Reserve), as well as Section 15308 (Class 8; Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment), since the tree maintenance activity's purpose is to also improve the health of the cypress grove.

Regarding the Coastal Development Permit, Find:

2. That the project, as described in the application and accompanying materials required by Zoning Regulations Section 6328.7, and as conditioned in accordance with Section 6328.14, conforms with the plans, policies, requirements and standards of the San Mateo County Local Coastal Program (LCP), as discussed in the staff report.
3. Where the project is located between the nearest public road and the sea, that the project is in conformity with the public access and public recreation policies of Chapter 3 of the Coastal Act of 1976 (commencing with Section 30200 of the Public Resources Code).
4. That the project conforms to the specific findings required by policies of the San Mateo County LCP.

Regarding the RM-CZ Development Review Criteria, Find:

5. That the project, as described in the application and accompanying materials and discussion in this report and as conditioned, conforms to the applicable Development Review Criteria pursuant to Chapter 20.A.2, Section 6234.

## **RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL**

### **Current Planning Section**

1. This approval applies only to the proposal, documents and plans described in this report and submitted to and approved by the Planning Commission on October 8, 2014. Minor adjustments to the project in the course of applying for building permits may be approved by the Community Development Director if they are consistent with the intent of and in substantial conformance with this approval.
2. All trees proposed for removal shall be cut at flush with the ground surface; root balls shall not be removed.
3. The County Parks Department's biologist shall conduct the requisite surveys of special status species prior to and during the subject tree removal and trimming activities (e.g., California Red-Legged Frog, San Francisco Garter Snake, San Francisco Dusky-Footed Woodrat, Nesting Raptors and Birds Protected Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and Roosting Bats), and implement the measures designed to avoid impacts to these species, in the manner cited specifically in Attachment E ("Excerpted Section from Cypress Forest Management Plan"). Prior to the initiation of any such tree activity, the biologist shall submit confirmation of such surveys and their results to the Community Development Director for review.

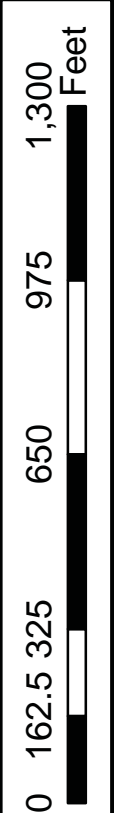
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**PLN2014-00211**

 FMR Boundary

 Zoning Boundary



**San Mateo County Planning Commission Meeting**

Owner/Applicant: SMC PARKS DEPT.

File Numbers: PLN2014-00211

Attachment: B



SOURCE: SAN MATEO COUNTY, 2010; THE PLANNING CENTER | DC&E, 2013; GOOGLE, 2013.

FIGURE 1 - PILOT PROJECT  
**CYPRESS GROVE ARBORIST HAZARD ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGY**  
 FITZGERALD MARINE RESERVE  
 SAN MATEO COUNTY

# San Mateo County Planning Commission Meeting

Owner/Applicant: SMC PARKS DEPT.

Attachment: C

File Numbers: PLN2014-00211

# CYPRESS GROVE PILOT PROJECT

## ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

The County of San Mateo has prepared this Cypress Grove Arborist Hazard Assessment and Strategy (the Assessment) for a 12.3-acre area of the James V. Fitzgerald Marine Reserve (Reserve) at Moss Beach in San Mateo County, California. The 402-acre Reserve is located approximately 7 miles north of Half Moon Bay and 15 miles south of San Francisco (see Figure 1) and is under joint custodianship of the County of San Mateo Parks and Recreation Division and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Inter-tidal and sub-tidal marine habitats are the Reserve's dominant habitat types, but the Reserve also includes 32 acres of upland habitat.

Located in the northern uplands area of the Reserve, the 14.09-acre Assessment Area is distinguished by a grove of Monterey cypress that was first established about 90 years ago and has spread over time. To the north and south of this grove, the Reserve is a broad band of shoreline with intermittent beaches and coastal bluffs. A small visitor center/office and a parking area are located on North Lake Street within the Moss Beach neighborhood, adjacent to the Moss Beach Reef and San Vicente Creek.

The cypress grove, originally planted as a windbreak, has become an iconic landscape that is beloved by the community and Reserve visitors. The dramatic landscape feeds the imagination, provides for unique outdoor experiences, creates a windbreak, and offers habitat for certain species. Evidence of the grove's value as a community asset is evidenced by the countless couples who choose the grove as the backdrop for their wedding photos. The grove's beloved character is in part due its great density, lack of diversity, and the results of minimal management. While the current density and lack of maintenance have contributed to the striking visual character of the grove, these aspects are also the source of significant hazards to Reserve visitors and they severely limit the biological habitat values of the grove (see Figure 2).

Although native to the Monterey area, Monterey cypress is not indigenous to this part of San Mateo County and has spread throughout much of the upland habitat of the Reserve. As the trees continue to mature and begin to decline in health, limb drop and toppling has become an increasing hazard to visitors. The dense grove has completely replaced native habitat, created light levels that generally preclude any understory vegetation, continues to



spread into adjacent habitat areas, and poses a severe risk to visitors as a result of the existing conditions. Although the Monterey cypress grove is located outside the natural range of the species, the grove generally represents little threat to the surrounding natural communities as long as the footprint is not allowed to continue to expand.<sup>1</sup> The density of trees and canopy cover have increased to the point where lower limbs and younger trees are dying off, there is no regeneration of cypress within the grove, and very little grows in the understory. Some invasive perennial groundcover and shrub species such as periwinkle, mirror plant, and pittosporum are beginning to spread through the understory in some locations, further compromising the limited habitat values.

Improving the health of the cypress grove can only be achieved by selective thinning to increase light levels to improve conditions for existing trees to be retained, as well as the future replacement of trees and establishment of groundcover species. Increasing light levels will eventually allow for improved health of individual trees, natural re-establishment of sapling trees, growth and vertical complexity of the canopy structure, and establishment and spread of groundcovers. Generally, the greater the complexity of the grove structure and diversity of plant cover, the higher the habitat values to wildlife. However, selective thinning must be carefully controlled to avoid creating conditions that could lead to wind-throw or toppling given the interdependence of the existing trees for structural support and balance.

This Assessment is a proactive effort to address the grove's increasing safety hazards and improve the health of the cypress grove in order that this valued landscape can continue to provide cultural, ecological, and structural functions. This Assessment is intended to provide the County of San Mateo with background information on existing conditions, regulatory implications, and opportunities and limitations for management. This Assessment also provides recommendations for reducing risks to Reserve visitors and improving the health of the cypress grove through selective thinning and future replacement of trees and establishment of groundcover species. Habitat restoration is not the focus of this Assessment given the dominant species is not indigenous to the area. However, the County intends to develop a subsequent program to ensure long-term viability of the cypress grove and improved habitat functions and values through native plant restoration and enhancement based on adaptive management practices and successes learned during implementation of this Plan.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fitzgerald Marine Reserve Master Plan, 2002.*

This Assessment was prepared using available information and mapping, data collected from supplemental field investigation and mapping, review of applicable guidelines and regulations including American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards for tree care (A300 Tree Care Standards) and best management standards for the industry, and professional judgment for forest management and treatment of individual trees.

## Goals and objectives

This Assessment has been prepared to identify appropriate practices in the Monterey cypress grove of the Reserve, providing a management framework to maintain the iconic grove while improving grove health and reducing potential safety hazards to visitors. Specifically, the Assessment aims to meet the following goal and objectives:

**Goal: Maintain iconic cypress grove character while improving public safety and the health of the grove.**

### Objectives:

- ◆ Decrease potential for hazards associated with tree failures by selective thinning or removal of undergrowth, overgrowth, limbs, and whole trees where hazardous. This will result in improved hazard ratings for individual trees.
- ◆ Increase ambient light levels through selective thinning and removal of deadwood, dead trees, and limbs or trees that have poor form that cannot be improved by thinning.
- ◆ Removing invasive tree species that threaten native plant and wildlife habitat, with the exception of mature Monterey Cypress trees, which are maintained for cultural and functional values.
- ◆ Retain stability of individual trees by trimming for end weight reduction rather than canopy reduction.
- ◆ Retain ability of grove to buffet strong winds by avoiding exposure of individual limbs and trees to the elements.
- ◆ Avoid inadvertent take of special-status species known from the vicinity during management activities and comply with all measures established by regulatory agencies to protect essential habitat and avoid loss.
- ◆ Identify short- and long-term tasks with consideration to available funding.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSED WORK

The Grove Hazard Assessment and Strategy provides recommendations for selective tree removal and pruning that focus on retaining mature trees where possible, removing trees that negatively impact health of the grove and/or public safety, pruning trees in order to improve grove health and reduce hazards. At this time no tree replacement is planned due to the high density of the grove resulting in poor individual tree health and increased hazards. In the future, when and where appropriate additional tree replacement will be revisited when this grove is at a density (below 50 trees per acre) able to support additional tree replacements. In addition to reducing risks to visiting public, the selective removal of trees within the cypress grove will reduce competition and improve light quality, resulting in greater opportunities for improved health for remaining trees, improved structural diversity for the grove, and increased opportunities for establishment of understory vegetation and stand regeneration. The lack of available light in the understory of the grove has generally excluded any groundcover species in most areas and prevents the germination and successful establishment of healthy cypress trees necessary for the grove to remain intact over time.

Based on the results of the Assessment and Strategy, there are a total of 1,067 trees with DBH of 8 inches or greater in the Assessment Area; small trees with DBH less than 8 inches were not assessed. Additional trees occur in the surrounding area of the Reserve. As part of the Assessment, priority ratings were assigned to each tree with consideration to the maintenance need, the potential hazard, and the area that would be impacted if the tree were to fail (the Matheny and Clark International Society of Arboriculture approved 12-point Hazard Assessment Method informed priority ratings). High priority trees include trees with significant hazards that would impact the Coastal Trail or smaller trails where people are more likely to be exposed to a failure. Trees located in areas that are not near or overhanging use areas or other vulnerable targets are considered to have a lower priority for treatment. The rating system of Priority 1 through 5 is used to establish a maintenance priority where a tree with rating of 1 should preferably be removed or trimmed during the first maintenance cycle, and on the other end of the range, a tree with a rating of 5 being in the lowest or fifth pruning cycle.

The Pilot Project includes trees identified as having a high priority rating by the Grove Hazard Assessment, blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*), as well as recommended tree work that falls within the San Vicente Creek Habitat Enhancement Assessment (SVCHEA) area in order to facilitate implementation of the San Vicente Creek Habitat Enhancement Assessment (SVCHEA). However, recommended work within the SVCHEA

area must be reviewed and approved by permitting agencies as part of the SVCHEA prior to work being conducted. Implementation of the Pilot Project would result in the removal of an estimated 62 trees and trimming of 56 trees. Removal of trees regulated under Section 12000 of the County Code (trees with a circumference of 38 inches or greater; see discussion in Chapter 2) would be limited to 27 trees. Untagged, dead trees are included in Pilot Project; the removal of these small trees is feasible for County staff to conduct in the near future and will provide immediate benefits to the grove. All tree work included in the Pilot Project is summarized in Table 1, located in Figure 1, and described in detail in Appendix A.

**TABLE 1 RECOMMENDED WORK**

**PILOT PROJECT OVERVIEW**

*Removal and trimming of Priority 1 trees as well as blue gum eucalyptus trees and trees within the San Vicente Creek Habitat Enhancement Assessment Area.*

*Note: Untagged, dead trees are also to be removed as part of the Pilot Project. Additional untagged trees to be removed in subsequent phases pending available (Untagged trees are under 8" DBH and are not represented in the table below)*

DBH	Dead		<38" Circumference		≥ 38" Circumference		TOTAL	
	Remove	Trim	Remove	Trim	Remove	Trim	Remove	Trim
8- 12" (tagged)	23	0	0	5	0	0	23	5
12" – 24"	7	0	0	0	7	21	14	21
24" – 30"	4	0	0	0	10	6	14	6
30" – 48"	1	0	0	0	7	14	8	14
48" and larger	0	0	0	0	3	10	3	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>56</b>

Excerpted Section from "Cypress Forest Management Plan"

## Sensitive and Regulated habitats

In general, sensitive habitats within the Assessment Area are limited to the San Vicente Creek Riparian Corridor Buffer Zone, and the remote potential that one or more species known or suspected to occur along the creek corridor could disperse further upland into the cypress grove. Raptors and other birds may nest in the tree cover in the Assessment Area, and their nests would be protected when in active use, typically from February through August. As discussed above, riparian policies from the 1998 LCP serve to defines a regulated "Riparian Corridor Buffer Zone" along the creek which generally extends 50 feet from the edge of riparian vegetation or the OHWM where riparian vegetation is absent, and was mapped along San Vicente Creek (see Figure 3). Policies in the 1998 LCP also provide for protection of sensitive habitat areas recognized as ESHAs in the Assessment Area. And the Corps, CDFW, and RWQCB also have jurisdiction over the creek corridor, with the Corps jurisdiction extending to the OHWM, and that of the CDFW and RWQCB extending to the top of bank or limits of riparian vegetation, whichever is greater.

## SPECIAL-STATUS SPECIES

The 2010 Biological Resource Assessment and 2010 Section 7 Biological Assessment prepared as part of the Coastal Development Permit Package for the Coastal Trail Improvement Project provide a detailed inventory of special-status species known or suspected from the northern portion of the Reserve and Assessment Area. Based on these assessments, no special-status plant species are known or suspected to occur within the Assessment Area. However, several special-status animal species are known or suspected to occur in the vicinity of the Assessment Area, and must be considered in any management activities to ensure no inadvertent take occurs during construction and maintenance activities. These consist of the following species:

◆ **California Red-legged Frog.** The California red-legged frog (CRF) is a federally listed Threatened species and a recognized as a Species of Special Concern by the CDFW. The Assessment Area is not within designated Critical Habitat for this species, but individual frogs are known to inhabit a pond immediately upstream and are referenced in the Coastal Trail Conditions of Approval. Although no suitable breeding habitat is present along the San Vicente Creek corridor in the Assessment Area, individual frogs could disperse and forage in the area, and would be susceptible to inadvertent take during removal and treatment of trees and invasive species if present in the Assessment Area, and suitable precautions should be anticipated.

◆ **San Francisco Garter Snake.** San Francisco garter snake (SFGS) is listed as both a state and federal endangered species, and a California fully-protected species. Critical Habitat has not been designated for this species, and no records have been reported by the CNDDDB for the San Vicente Creek watershed. Well-developed stands of freshwater marsh with abundant CRF which serve as prey are typically the preferred habitat for SFGS, but individuals are known to disperse along creek channels and adjacent riparian and grassland habitat. As with CRF, there is a remote possibility that individual snakes could disperse into the upland areas of the cypress grove where they would be susceptible to inadvertent take during tree removal, tree pruning, and treatment of invasive species, if present in the vicinity of construction activities in the Assessment Area.

◆ **San Francisco Dusky-footed Woodrat.** The San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat (*Neotoma fuscipes annectens*) is recognized as a Species of Special Concern by the CDFW. No characteristic nests of this species

were observed during surveys of the Assessment Area, but suitable habitat is present within the dense riparian scrub along the San Vicente Creek corridor, and new nests could be established in the future. This species is generally nocturnal, but protection of conspicuous nest structures should be provided if encountered during construction activities in the Assessment Area.

◆ **Nesting Raptors and Birds Protected Under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.** The Monterey cypress trees, blue gum eucalyptus, willow forest, and larger shrubs provide suitable substrate for nesting birds, which are protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Nests of raptors are also protected under provisions in the State Fish and Wildlife Code, when in active use. Removal and management of mature trees and invasive vegetation must be carefully timed to prevent inadvertent disturbance and possible abandonment of bird nests when in active use, typically from February through August. Preconstruction surveys should be performed by a qualified biologist to confirm absence of any nests in active use if tree removal and trimming is to occur during the nesting season.

◆ **Roosting Bats.** A number of bat species recognized as Species of Special Concern by the CDFW have a remote potential for occurrence in the mature trees in the Assessment Area. Removal of mature trees must be performed in a manner that prevents inadvertent disturbance to roosting bats, if present. Preconstruction surveys should be performed by a qualified biologist to confirm absence of any roosting bats for trees containing suitable roosting conditions.

# Cypress Grove

## Healthy Conditions



Well Maintained Cypresses



Good Live Crown Ratio, Good Form

## Hazardous Conditions



Uprooted Tree



Poor Crotch Formation



Failed Codominant Leader



Broken Leader



Poor Live Crown Ratio, Poor Trunk Taper



Heavy Lateral Limbs, Over Extended



**Cypress Grove Arborist Hazard Assessment and Strategy**  
Fitzgerald Marine Reserve  
San Mateo County

## San Mateo County Planning Commission Meeting

Owner/Applicant: SMC PARKS DEPT.

File Numbers: PLN2014-00211

Attachment: F