



## Mt. Wanda Comprehensive Site Management Plan / Environmental Assessment

Newsletter #2, March 2022

### From the Superintendent,

John Muir National Historic Site is inviting public comment on a proposal for management of the Mt. Wanda unit.

The Mt. Wanda planning area is a 370-acre portion of the historic Martinez ranch where John Muir lived. At Mt. Wanda, visitors can walk in John Muir's footsteps as they explore, research, and appreciate the wildness of this inspirational landscape. The plan for Mt. Wanda will identify new visitor opportunities and functions, facility needs, and resource management strategies, while improving the connectivity of Mt. Wanda to other areas of the park and the broader community.

This public scoping period is an opportunity to re-engage individuals, organizations, agencies, and other interested parties in the planning process. Public scoping is designed to obtain input on issues and areas of concern related to the project, the nature and extent of potential environmental impacts and benefits, and appropriate mitigation strategies. Because the environmental assessment (EA) will analyze many important and interrelated issues, your participation is encouraged and

needed. We look forward to your involvement in our planning for the Mt. Wanda unit and will ensure that your concerns and ideas are evaluated.

During this scoping period, the public is invited to identify any additional issues or concerns they might have with the proposed action so that the NPS can appropriately consider them in the preparation of the EA. Public review and comments on the EA itself will also be invited when it is released later this year.

Naomi L. Torres  
Acting Superintendent

### Newsletter Contents

- Background
- Previous public outreach
- Proposals for management of the Mt. Wanda planning area (the proposed action)
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## Brief Overview of the Planning Area

John Muir National Historic Site is comprised of portions of the 2600-acre ranch where John Muir helped raise a family, farmed, wrote, and advocated for environmental conservation. Established in 1964 and expanded through subsequent legislation, the park today consists of three separate areas: the Strentzel-Muir estate, the open space lands of Mt. Wanda, and the Strentzel-Muir gravesite where Muir is buried.

Mt. Wanda is a 326-acre open space dominated by grass and oak woodland used by hikers, bikers, and horseback riders that was added to the park in 1991. The predominately natural landscape is primarily used by visitors as a place to experience nature in an otherwise urbanized surrounding. The Strentzel Meadow area (the former Strain Ranch) is a 3.86-acre reservation that was used as a small ranch prior to becoming part of the park. A 44.36-acre parcel referred to as the West Hills Farm was acquired by the John Muir Land Trust for donation to the park that preserves additional critical habitat for the threatened Alameda Whipsnake and would expand visitor opportunities at Mt. Wanda. Together, these three contiguous areas comprise the 370-acre Mt. Wanda planning area.

## What is the Mt. Wanda Comprehensive Site Management Plan and Environmental Assessment?

The Comprehensive Site Management Plan (CSMP) will define appropriate uses and functions for the Mt. Wanda planning area, balancing visitor use, climate change considerations, facilities, and natural and cultural resources management, and improving the connectivity between Mt. Wanda, the Muir House, the Strentzel-Muir gravesite, adjacent public lands, and the surrounding neighborhoods.

The CSMP will:

- Clearly define resource conditions, visitor uses and experiences, visitor capacity, types and intensities of development, and operational, administrative, and curatorial uses to be achieved within the planning area.
- Provide a framework for NPS managers to guide decisions about protecting resources and providing high-quality visitor experiences through management of visitor activities and facilities.
- Develop a foundation for decision-making in consultation with interested stakeholders and NPS leadership, based on analysis of the benefits, impacts, and costs of the alternatives.

This CSMP is intended to build on the legislation that established and governs the planning area to provide a vision for the future.

Actions directed by this plan will be accomplished over time. Budget restrictions, requirements for additional data or regulatory compliance, and competing priorities may delay or modify implementation of actions. The plan asks us to imagine what Mt. Wanda will look like in 15 to 20 years.

The CSMP does not describe how particular programs or projects will be implemented. Those decisions are deferred to more detailed implementation planning, which will follow the broad, comprehensive planning presented in this CSMP. Future planning would be consistent with the approved CSMP. To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act and NPS policy, the plan is expected to be evaluated through an environmental assessment (EA). The plan will identify issues and concerns and present a reasonable range of management alternatives for public review. The EA will also analyze the environmental consequences of each of the alternatives and identify a preferred alternative. At the end of the EA process, the NPS may issue a “Finding of No Significant Impact” which is the document that would finalize the decision on the Comprehensive Site Management Plan.



Olive orchard on West Hills Farm



## Previous Public Outreach

A preliminary concepts newsletter was released for public comment in 2018. The planning team met with representatives from other agencies, organizations, and interested members of the public to discuss the pros and cons of each concept. Respondents were generally supportive of improvements to the trail system, development of the Strentzel Meadow area for visitor use, protection of the cultural landscape, and restoration of ecological functions on the newly acquired lands. Safe access between park sites was also important to many respondents. The project was subsequently put on hold and the park sought additional data to study the feasibility of potential safe pedestrian, vehicle, and bicycle access improvements. The new proposed action incorporates public comments provided during the review of the preliminary concepts and mostly contains elements drawn from those concepts.

## Desired Conditions

Desired conditions describe the visitor experiences and resource conditions that the NPS will strive to achieve through implementation of the plan. They can be read as objectives of the plan.

### Habitat Protection and Vegetation Management / Cultural Landscape Preservation

Visitors are readily able to experience predominately native vegetation and wildlife.

The landscape remains undeveloped and is managed to retain its natural

character as a portion of the historic scene of the Strentzel-Muir ranch.

Special status species are protected and visitors are aware of these species whether physically visiting the site or learning about the site through other outlets.

The area is managed to maintain ecological processes with minimal impact from visitor use. The watersheds, hydrology, and riparian areas remain intact and contribute to landscape resiliency.

The cultural landscape, comprised of historic roads and trails, views of the Alhambra Valley, grasslands, and oak woodlands, conveys a sense of the historic setting and feeling of Alhambra Valley during the late 19th and early 20th century.

### Access and Connectivity to Mt. Wanda

There are safe and efficient connections between the Strentzel-Muir gravesite area, Mt. Wanda, and the Muir House in the form of vehicular roads; trails; and pedestrian, transit, and bicycle options.

### Road and Trail Planning and Maintenance

Roads and trails are sustainable, do not contribute to erosion, and provide access for emergency vehicles and operational needs.

Trails make logical and safe connections to various visitor experiences and facilities.

Trail uses are appropriate for the size, type, and designation of trails.

Adjacent or nearby land management agencies and organizations (e.g., East Bay Regional Park District and the John Muir Land Trust) coordinate with the NPS to achieve resource

management objectives, such as providing a clearly defined transition between lands and trails and a clarification of differing rules and regulations.

### Visitor Experience, Facilities, and Interpretive Features and Programming

Visitor experiences at Mt. Wanda, including Strentzel Meadow and West Hills Farm, are high quality and accessible.

Visitors draw inspiration from the Muir heritage, including John Muir's role in the establishment of the national park system, conservation, and the historical inequities of those movements. The land is managed to provide for extended interpretation of the life, lifestyle, and philosophy of John Muir.

Visitors are provided opportunities to explore, research, picnic, and appreciate the wildness and quiet solitude of the area.

Visitors, students, and researchers have opportunities to access museum collections associated with Mt. Wanda.

Access to and throughout the Mt. Wanda area is welcoming and provides a range of opportunities to visitors with diverse backgrounds and interests.

Youth, students, and the local community have opportunities to see, learn about, and be involved in restoration stewardship projects.

Visitors understand rules and regulations and their intent to enhance visitor safety and orientation, protect resources, and encourage desirable visitor experiences.

## Proposed Action

The *proposed action* is the initial National Park Service (NPS) proposal to address the challenges and opportunities presented in the 2018 Preliminary Concepts Newsletter. It represents the possible framework of one alternative that will be considered during the planning process. The NPS will also, at a minimum, consider a no-action alternative. The NPS will not select an alternative for implementation until after environmental compliance is completed under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). There will be another opportunity to comment when the NPS releases an environmental assessment analyzing the environmental costs and benefits of each alternative. Your comments on the specific proposals below are appreciated and will be used to improve the plan.

### Administration/Maintenance Area

In order to remove administrative and operational activities from the Muir House (a National Historic Landmark), protect curatorial materials from potential flooding and poor environmental controls, and provide sufficient storage for the existing museum collections, the park would remove the Franklin Canyon maintenance facility and replace it in the same location with a two-story building that can accommodate curatorial, administrative, and maintenance functions.

Staff offices would move from the Muir House to this location, potentially opening more of the Muir House to visitors. Additional employee parking could be constructed to the east. The facility

would continue to serve as an administrative/maintenance area with limited public access.



Alameda Whipsnake

### Strentzel Meadow Area

No overnight facilities would be provided. The existing buildings, including the house, barn, and bungalow, would be removed. A trailhead with a small parking lot (15-20 stalls), accommodation for 1-2 school buses, an accessible restroom, and drinking water would be developed.

The NPS would pursue construction of a new stewardship education center in the vicinity of the existing bungalow. The center would be focused on educational use, providing a flexible classroom/lab space. The park would pursue a partnership approach to funding, reaching out to other agencies and park partners for shared funding and programming.

A gathering circle, minimally furnished with natural materials, would serve primarily as a space for staging school groups. In addition, an accessible, covered picnic pavilion would be provided. Additional individual and group picnic tables could be located at Strentzel Meadow or on Mt. Wanda.

## Natural and Cultural Resources

The NPS would continue to implement the Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) treatment recommendations for Mt. Wanda and implement vegetation management best practices that correspond with protection of the cultural landscape. Invasive plant species would be controlled.

The NPS would continue maintenance and restoration of native plant communities which support preservation of the cultural landscape, primarily the mosaic pattern of woodlands and grasslands. The park would continue monitoring and protection of California Native Plant Society identified rare plant species. The park would undertake more active approaches to manage native grassland and chaparral for their ecological benefits. Existing olive orchards and historic trees would be maintained to their historic footprints and not allowed to expand.

The NPS would pursue cooperation and coordination for resource management objectives with adjacent land management agencies and organizations such as East Bay Regional Park District and the John Muir Land Trust as well as community partners such as Alhambra Watershed Council and Friends of Alhambra Creek.

The park would increase measures to elevate public awareness of special status species on Mt. Wanda. This could help in the prevention of informal trails in areas that affect such species. In consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alameda whipsnake habitat would be protected. New trails and facilities would avoid areas where they are frequently found.



More research would be conducted to identify native and nonnative species that occupied Mt. Wanda during the period of significance associated with the Strentzel-Muir Ranch and learn more about oak die off to aid oak woodland management.

The park would develop a plan for active restoration of the Strentzel Creek floodplain area, including revegetation and re-contouring of the land. Grading would be undertaken to realign the creek into a braided channel formation using the alluvial fan as needed before being redirected under Alhambra Valley Road. Channel formation would be driven by the flowing water and could take multiple, changing forms such as braided channels or a single shifting channel. The NPS would monitor channel formation but would only intervene if the channel threatens infrastructure or begins to become incised. The existing concrete low-water crossing, building foundations, and other human-made obstructions would be removed from the floodplain. Any new development in the Strentzel Creek area would be located and/or designed to minimize impediments to floodplain processes.

The NPS would seek opportunities to involve youth, students, and the local community in restoration stewardship opportunities. Non-profit organizations and universities would be actively engaged in restoration efforts and research.

A new vegetation management plan for the park unit would be completed.

## Education and Interpretation

The NPS would continue to provide interpretive and educational opportunities related to Mt. Wanda

at the John Muir NHS visitor center as well as through waysides, kiosks, brochures, special events, and the internet. Interpretation would focus on natural history, John Muir's use of Mt. Wanda, and changes to the landscape since John Muir's time including the cultural landscape and restoration of the floodplain.

Routine programming, such as ranger-led naturalist hikes and stewardship events would continue to be provided for up to 40 people per program. Program topics could include wildflowers, John Muir's life, landscape changes over time, and ethnobotany. Infrequent, actively managed special events which occur outside of typical visitation hours for the general public, including full-moon and dark-sky hikes would continue to be provided for up to 200 people per event. Self-guided experiences would continue to be emphasized.

A wayside interpretive plan for the Mt. Wanda planning area, balancing interpretation with nature immersion, would be developed. The park's long-range interpretation plan would be updated and would address

new opportunities at Strentzel Meadow and West Hills Farm. An updated trail map for the Mt. Wanda area would be developed.

## Trails

The main trail from the commuter lot to the top of Mt. Wanda would be maintained as a wide multi-use trail, allowing pedestrians, cyclists (including e-bikes), and horses, with occasional administrative vehicle access. The Nature Trail would be retained as a narrow pedestrian trail. The NPS would improve and realign the narrow pedestrian Riparian Trail to reduce erosion.

The NPS would eliminate existing steep trail segments, where feasible, through improved grades and alignments to decrease erosion, improve sustainability, and provide a less strenuous visitor experience. New trails or reroutes would be sited to protect the watershed and minimize erosion. A trail maintenance and monitoring plan and program would be developed to identify management issues and priorities, including culverts, erosion,



View of Mt. Diablo from Mt Wanda Summit

whipsnake protection, social trails, and community involvement.

The steepest portion of the fire road from the summit of Mt. Wanda to the new Strentzel Meadow trailhead would be restored to its natural state and replaced with a more gradually graded, switch-backed narrow pedestrian path.

An accessible, interpretive, pedestrian loop would be developed at the Strentzel Meadow trailhead, incorporating a low water crossing. Ethnobotany, restoration, and historic uses are potential interpretive opportunities.

A wide pedestrian trail from the Strentzel Meadow trailhead would be developed along the abandoned fire road that follows Strentzel Creek, connecting with the main trail near the gate to Almond Ranch.

By using some existing road traces and restoring unsustainable sections to natural conditions, a pedestrian trail system would be designated and improved in the West Hills Farm area.

Additional research would be conducted in association with the NPS National Trails Office to more accurately determine the route of the Pony Express National Historic Trail (NHT) adjacent to Mt. Wanda. Once confirmed, the route would be identified through signage and added to trail maps consistent with the goals and objectives outlined in the management and implementation plans of the NHT.

### Access and Connectivity

The NPS would work with agencies who own or have jurisdiction over adjacent land and in consultation with park neighbors to address access and connectivity between Mt. Wanda, other areas of the park,

and the broader community. The commuter lot would be retained as a primary access point to Mt. Wanda, and the NPS would work with the City of Martinez to keep the trailhead and parking lot open, clean, and accessible, including potentially paving and formalizing parking. The NPS would improve universal access, signage, and waste management at the trailhead.

The NPS would work with the City of Martinez and Caltrans to recommend and support the development of new sidewalks along Franklin Canyon Road and a new crosswalk, connecting the Highway 4 tunnel and commuter lot with a more accessible route.

The NPS would work with the City of Martinez and Caltrans to recommend and support the additions of new crosswalks and a new sidewalk along the west side of Alhambra Avenue that would connect the Muir House, the commuter lot, the Riparian Trail, and Alhambra Valley Road. The sidewalk, along with a crossing of Alhambra Avenue, would provide safe access from the adjacent neighborhoods and school and facilitate regional trail connectivity for the California Riding and Hiking Trail and the Mokelumne Coast to Crest Trail.

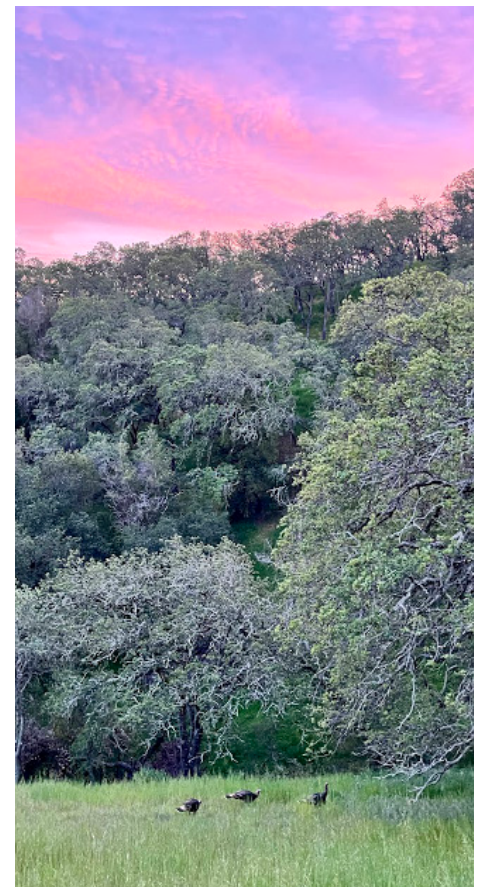
A new vehicle entry, parking area, and trailhead would be developed at Strentzel Meadow. The NPS would work with Contra Costa County and the City of Martinez to recommend and support the development of a pedestrian crossing on Alhambra Valley Road and new sidewalk between John Swett Elementary School and Strentzel Meadow.

To support continued achievement of desired resource conditions and visitor experiences, along with the elements of this proposed action,

including the new trailhead and facilities at Strentzel Meadow, the entirety of the Mt. Wanda planning area would be managed for a total visitor capacity of 100 people at one time (PAOT). This capacity is approximately three times the current use level and includes 60 PAOT plus an allocation for up to 40 PAOT for routine programming events.

### Environmental Sustainability

The NPS would prioritize energy efficiency, conservation, and sustainability associated with any new development. The sustainability guidelines set forth in the NPS Green Parks Plan would be followed.



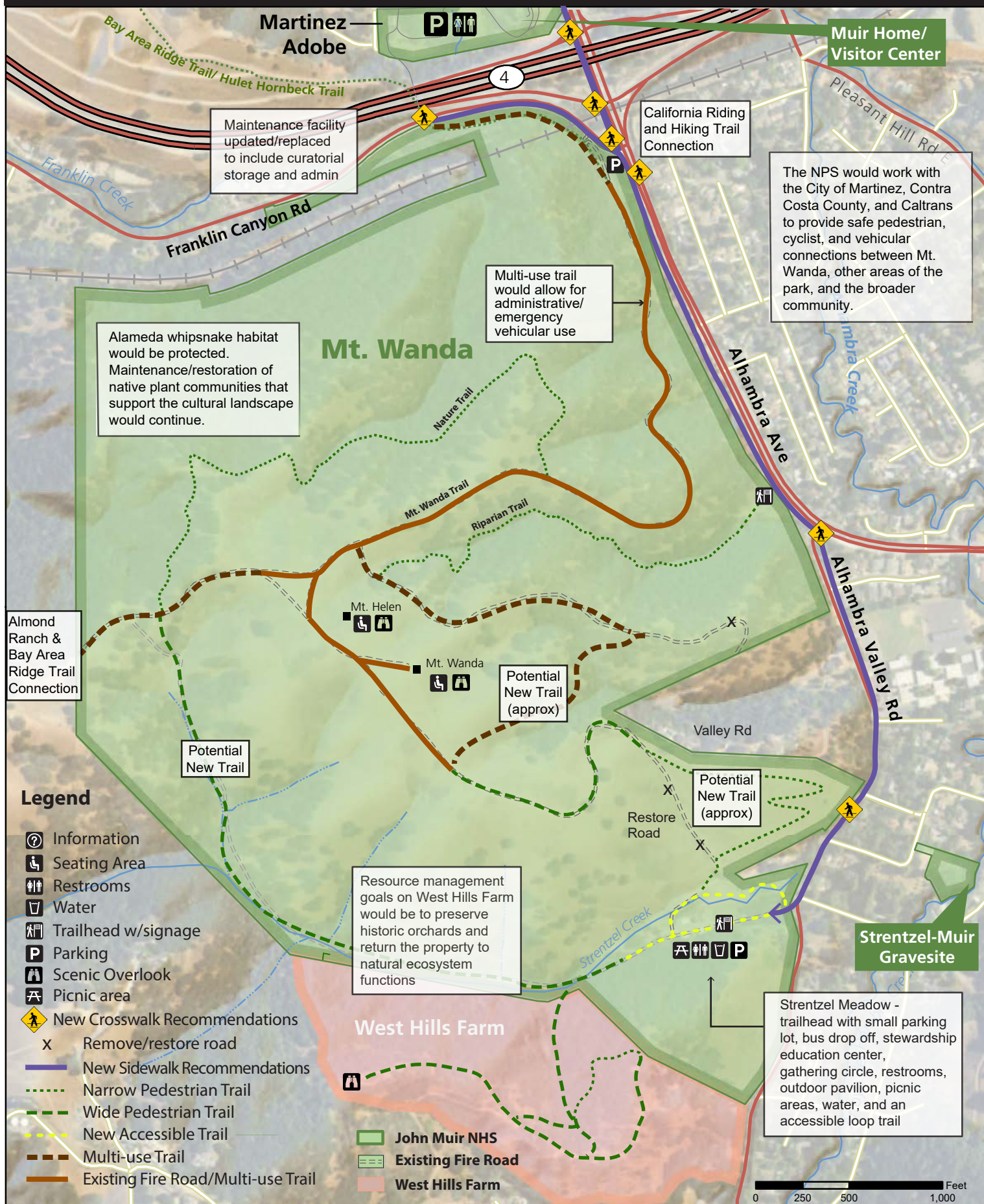
Turkeys from Mt. Wanda Trail



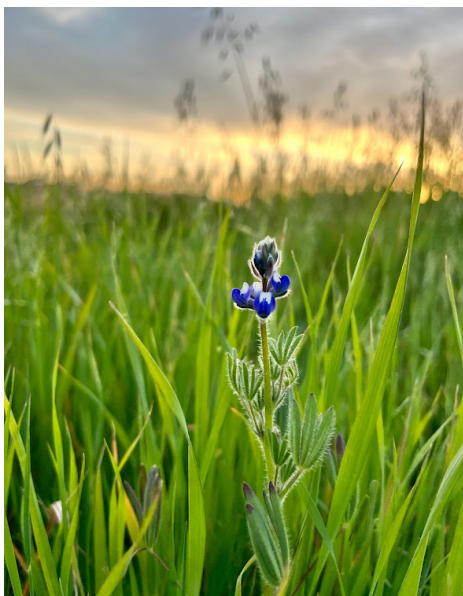
# Proposed Action Map

## Mt. Wanda Comprehensive Site Management Plan

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior







Lupine at dusk

## Steps in the Planning Process

The planning process will likely involve the following steps:

- Public Scoping – Describe the proposed action. *This is where we are right now.*
- Develop Alternatives – The planning team will develop reasonable alternatives to the proposed action, based on public input, safety considerations, visitor opportunities, and resource analysis.
- Prepare/Distribute Comprehensive Site Management Plan and Environmental Assessment. You will have an opportunity to comment on the plan and environmental assessment. The planning team expects to release this document in Summer 2022.
- Prepare/Distribute Finding of No Significant Impact

## How Can I Be Involved?

Your involvement in the planning process is critical for the completion of a successful plan. There are two time periods when you can provide formal comments. The first one is underway and ends on **April 15th**. The next opportunity will be when the draft plan is released later this year. You can always write or call us to voice your concerns or insights and check in on the planning process. Here are several ways for you to participate:

- Comment online at [https://parkplanning.nps.gov/mt\\_wanda\\_scoping](https://parkplanning.nps.gov/mt_wanda_scoping)
- Email your comments to [trevor\\_rice@nps.gov](mailto:trevor_rice@nps.gov)
- Send a letter to the Superintendent at:

Mt. Wanda Comprehensive Site Management Plan  
Superintendent  
John Muir National Historic Site  
4202 Alhambra Ave  
Martinez, CA 94553

## Guided Mt. Wanda Hikes

The NPS will host two informational hikes in April to allow members of the public to experience portions of the West Hills Farm parcel and Strentzel Creek watershed that are not normally accessible. Access to the area is limited, and consequently, the NPS must limit capacity of the hikes. The hikes will be moderately strenuous and about 3.5 miles in length with approximately 600 feet elevation gain. The terrain is variable, often steep, and uneven, primarily consisting of unmaintained or abandoned fire roads. Please visit the booking page at [tinyurl.com/2p8ze47x](https://www.tinyurl.com/2p8ze47x) for more information and to sign up.



Strentzel Meadow from Mt. Wanda