

STAFF REPORT

DATE: October 16, 2019
TO: Board of Directors
FROM: Steve Sims, Director of Parks and Neighborhood Services
Parks and Recreation Department
BY: Josh Branco, Management Analyst
SUBJECT: ELK GROVE PARK WILDLIFE PROTECTION PLAN



RECOMMENDATION

The Board of Directors:

1. Directs staff to reinstate fishing at Elk Grove Park in accordance with the provisions outlined below; and
2. Directs staff to implement the Wildlife Protection Plan.

BACKGROUND

On April 17, 2019, the Board of Directors (Board) directed staff to impose a six-month moratorium on fishing at Elk Grove Park Lake. This action was in response to injured wildlife and litter caused by irresponsible fishing.

Since that time, District staff consulted with stakeholders to determine next steps to protect the waterfowl living at the park and improve the Elk Grove Park experience for all patrons. Public outreach included an online survey, three focus group meetings and an information booth at the Elk Grove Giant Pumpkin Festival. Additionally, numerous outside agencies were consulted, including: San Joaquin County Parks & Recreation, East Bay Municipal Utility District, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, California Department of Water Resources, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Staff has synthesized all of this information and developed a comprehensive Wildlife Protection Plan for Elk Grove Park.

ANALYSIS

Fishing at Elk Grove Park

Fishing at Elk Grove Park is a recreational activity that has been enjoyed by Elk Grove residents for decades. Elk Grove Park Lake not only provides an opportunity to introduce children to the sport of fishing, but also offers a unique environment in which residents of all abilities can relax, socialize, and enjoy the outdoors. Furthermore, this facility appeals to under-represented communities that do not typically engage with District park and recreation programs.

Unfortunately, this valued public resource has been jeopardized by the actions of a few irresponsible anglers, primarily in the form of improperly disposed of fishing line and other fishing-related debris that harm the waterfowl at the park. Staff believes this behavior can be managed and corrected, and for this reason, that it is in the best interest of the community to reinstate fishing at Elk Grove Park with the following provisions:

- **New regulations** – New regulations (Attachment A) based on input from residents and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) will be enacted to limit both the prevalence and negative effects of irresponsible fishing.
- **Fishing season** – Fishing at Elk Grove Park will be permitted from March 1 through November 30. Staff will work with local stakeholders, as well as CDFW, to develop an annual opening day event. This opening day event will expand upon the existing Fishing in the City events, a CDFW program that teaches fishing techniques and safety, to include additional education on fishing etiquette and environmental stewardship.
- **Enforcement** – Staff believe an enforcement mechanism is essential to successfully implement the regulations described above. As such, a Park Ranger position is under development. This position will be tasked with both educating the public and enforcing applicable rules and regulations. Park Rangers will not issue citations, but they may ask patrons to leave the park, or call additional law enforcement if necessary. Staff would like this position to be in place prior to March 2020, and will submit a full report once this aspect of the recommendation is complete.
- **Facility cleanup** – The offseason, December 1 through the end of February, will allow for additional maintenance in addition to the regular daily cleanup patrols. Staff will also pilot a magnet fishing event in January 2020 as a part of the cleanup effort. Magnet fishing involves searching for magnetic objects under the water's surface by submerging a strong magnet, attached to a rope, and slowly pulling it out once it has "hooked" or attached to an object.
- **Improved signage** – New signage notifying the public of all applicable rules and regulations will be posted at Elk Grove Park Lake. This space will also be used to distribute information on proper fishing technique and etiquette.
- **Public education** – Materials instructing the public on proper fishing etiquette will be developed and distributed by staff and volunteers. Staff will produce a public service announcement video to be distributed on social media and the District's website.

Wildlife Protection Plan

Elk Grove Park Lake is home to not only fish, but several other wildlife species beloved by residents. In particular, the geese and ducks that reside at the park, either permanently or as a temporary stop on their migratory journey, are enjoyed by patrons of all ages. However, waterfowl can become problematic when their numbers become so large that it results in overgrazing and excessive droppings.

As such, staff believes the District should make every effort to ensure the well-being of waterfowl currently living at the park, while humanely discouraging permanent population growth. The following initiatives have been developed to improve conditions for the wildlife at Elk Grove Park:

- **Close Pirate's Island** – Access to Pirate's Island will be closed to provide waterfowl with a safe place to nest and graze away from human interference. Staff will reevaluate the island's closure if funds become available in the future for the Pirate's Island Playground Project, which is included in the Parks and Recreation Department's Capital Improvement Plan.
- **Ban on feeding waterfowl** – Feeding unnatural food such as bread and crackers to waterfowl contributes to a host of undesirable outcomes, including: disruption of natural migration patterns, aggressive behavior, health problems and the spread of disease. Uneaten food also attracts unwanted pests. Eliminating unnatural foods will limit the number of new waterfowl taking up residence at Elk Grove Park, and improve the health of those already present. Staff considered installing coin-operated waterfowl food dispensers as an alternative to a ban on feeding, but felt the risk of vandalism and overfeeding outweighed the potential benefits. Trained volunteers and/or staff will continue to feed appropriate food to the domestic waterfowl at the park.
- **Enforce the ban on animal abandonment** – Abandoning an animal at a District facility is expressly prohibited by Ordinance No. 15, however this is an ongoing problem at Elk Grove Park. Many of the waterfowl currently inhabiting the facility are domestic ducks that have been abandoned by their previous owners. Staff will work with local law enforcement to determine what can be done to enforce this provision of Ordinance No. 15, and discourage the practice of animal abandonment at Elk Grove Park.
- **Public education and signage** – Materials instructing the public on why they should not feed the waterfowl, or abandon animals, will be developed and distributed by staff and volunteers. New signage notifying the public of the ban on feeding and abandoning waterfowl will be posted at Elk Grove Park Lake. Staff will produce a public service announcement video to be distributed on social media and the District's website.
- **Volunteers** – Staff will continue to work with volunteers to clean up Elk Grove Park Lake and care for the wildlife there. Volunteers who have been appropriately trained will be authorized to feed the domestic waterfowl, and will continue to assist with the District's public education efforts. Staff is exploring a possible partnership with the Florin High School Watershed Environmental Team.
- **Elk Grove Park Lake Fund** – Staff will submit a report to the Cosumnes Legacy Foundation, recommending the creation of an Elk Grove Park Lake Fund to take donations to be used for improving Elk Grove Park Lake, and caring for the health and wellness of the wildlife that inhabits the park.
- **Facility improvements** – Migrating geese are attracted to bodies of water surrounded by large areas of open turf. This type of environment provides ample opportunities for grazing, as well as clear sightlines to monitor incoming predators. Given Elk Grove Park's topography, it is ideally suited to hosting migratory geese. Improving the landscape between the walking path and lakeside by incorporating boulders, natural grasses and shrubs, would limit the clear sightlines sought out by migratory geese. Along with the above recommendations, these additions would contribute to the area's natural beauty, while limiting the opportunity for seasonal fluctuations to become permanent population growth over time. These improvements

to the facility will be undertaken as a part of the 2019-2022 Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan Objective 2.5, which calls for an Elk Grove Park Master Plan in 2021.

All of these initiatives will be evaluated over time to measure their effectiveness and determine if additional changes are necessary.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The approved 2019-2020 L&L Assessment District Budget included \$5,000 for conservation efforts related to Elk Grove Park Lake. Staff may request additional funds at mid-year for signage, educational materials and a Park Ranger program once the final scope of work has been determined.

There is no impact to the General Fund by what is being requested in this report.

SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS

The recommendations included in this report will encourage the responsible and sustainable enjoyment of Elk Grove Park by providing patrons with education on fishing and wildlife protection, and improving the environment in and around the lake.

Should you have any questions, please contact me prior to the Board meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Steve Sims, Director of Parks and Neighborhood Services
Parks and Recreation Department

Attachment A – Elk Grove Park Fishing Rules & Regulations

Staff Report recommendation authorized by:

Approved as to Form:

General Manager

General Counsel