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Westly Transfers Land to Preserve Ballona Wetlands

Controller Works to Protect LA's Largest Remaining Coastal Habitat

LOS ANGELES – State Controller Steve Westly announced today the transfer of 62 acres of the Ballona Wetlands, the largest remaining coastal wetlands in Los Angeles, to the California Department of Fish and Game for preservation as open space.

The Controller's Office transfer protects wetlands formerly owned by billionaire Howard Hughes and once earmarked for development as part of the controversial Playa Vista project.

"This is a huge victory for the environment and for park-starved Los Angeles," Westly said. "Most of our coastal wetlands are gone. Today, we're protecting the largest remaining wetland in the region for future generations to learn from and enjoy."

Westly announced the formal transfer at a news conference, where he was joined by leaders of the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Baldwin Hills Conservancy, the Ballona Valley Preservation League, Heal the Bay, the Wetlands Action Network, Environment California and the Ballona Wetlands Land Trust.

"Sierra Club is proud to have been a part of the team that led efforts to make sure this part of the Ballona Wetlands are protected for the wildlife and for breathing space for the citizens of the Los Angeles region," said Virgil Shields, chair of the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter.

Legislation approved last year (SB 666-Bowen) authorized the transfer of the property, known as Area C. Though deeded to the state following Hughes' death, the fate of the property was clouded by an option to purchase held by a developer. Citing environmental concerns, the Controller's Office refused to extend the option in 2000. The state earlier acquired two other parcels, Areas A and B, using State park bonds and donations.

"The people who really deserve the credit for this are the community activists who have spent more than two decades battling plan after plan after plan to pave over and develop the wetlands," said Sen. Debra Bowen (D-Marina del Rey). "Without their commitment, there wouldn't be any Parcels A & B to buy or any Parcel C to transfer to the state because there wouldn't be any Ballona Wetlands left to protect."

"This landmark acquisition will provide Los Angeles and all of California with a historic legacy and I am proud to have authored legislation that helped make this possible," said Assemblymember George Nakano (D-Torrance), who authored AB 859 to reappropriate \$25 million for the wetlands. "Given the degree of consensus among state agencies, conservation groups and the landowner, it was important to me that all three parcels were acquired by the State simultaneously. Today ends a three-decade-long struggle in acquiring one of the last remaining, and largest coastal wetland areas in Los Angeles County."

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"I am honored to have played a part in assisting the State of California in acquiring these 62 acres to add to the precious Ballona wetlands," said Assembly Speaker Emeritus Herb J. Wesson Jr., a co-author of the bill. "The restoration and conservation of natural areas in our busy urban core help keep the Golden State a jewel."

Environmentalists have long sought to preserve the Ballona Wetlands, which provide a spawning ground for ocean life and a stopover for migratory birds. A number of endangered species have been known to inhabit the area, including the American Peregrine Falcon, the Great Blue Heron, the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, the Pacific Pocket Mouse, the El Segundo Blue Butterfly, the San Diego Fairy Shrimp, and the Tidewater Goby.

The Ballona Wetlands once encompassed more than 2,000 acres, covering much of today's Venice, Marina del Rey and parts of West Los Angeles. Over the years, the wetlands were reduced to less than 190 acres.

The Baldwin Hills Conservancy has developed a plan for a bike path and riparian corridor along Ballona Creek that would link the Kenneth Hahn Park in Baldwin Hills to the Ballona Wetlands and the Pacific Ocean. This project is in the planning stages.

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