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Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission, from Sarah Sweedler, President & CEO of Fort Ross Conservancy

I present this on behalf of the Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC), the 501c3 and California cooperating association in support of Fort Ross State Historic Park and Salt Point Park, in Western Sonoma County.

What is Fort Ross?

Fort Ross is a gorgeous state historic park in Western Sonoma County, founded in 1909. Fort Ross is 3,400 acres on a remote stretch of coastline, and it is primarily known for its historic Russian compound. In addition to the history, Fort Ross has pristine coast line, a marine reserve, redwood forests and an interesting vantage point atop the San Andreas Fault. FRC is also responsible for assisting Salt Point Park to its north, a 6,000 acre site of unparalleled beauty.

Is Fort Ross on the closure list?

Fort Ross is not on the closure list. Up until 2010, we were open 364 days a year.

However, many parks not on the closure list are suffering from serious service reductions. For about ten months, we were open only two days a week. For a few months this summer, we're open three days a week – and this during our bicentennial year, when we are expecting thousands of visitors. Further cutbacks during the next fiscal year will disastrous for us.

Several of our sub-units, such as Reef Campground and several day-use beaches, are closed full time under service reduction, even though they are not on the official closure list. Service reductions truly are the dirty little secret of State Parks. **The public needs an accounting of all parks suffering service reductions.**

How are service reductions at Fort Ross affecting donors, visitors & our future?

Service reductions further perpetuate the financial problems of both the parks and the co-ops. Nothing alienates the public more than finding out the park is closed on the day they decide to visit.

Service reductions deprive us, indeed deprive all state parks, of the very thing we need most to be self-sufficient: visitors. The more days our gate is locked, the fewer visitors seek us out, and therefore, the lower our income. This matters to us; we have staffed the visitor center and museum for the last 25+ years, and our organization depends on that gift shop revenue. Following this logic, threatened closures become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more our public is kept away, the less public we have.

Asking donors to backfill the costs of service reductions has proved impossible for us. Donors are deeply wary to get into the business of funding day-to-day operations, especially at the price tag that CSP quotes them: CSP is asking for \$2,000 per day to open Fort Ross. None of our donors believe that is part of their mission. If the park were operated under a different more cost-effective model, their response may well shift.

What is the Fort Ross Conservancy?

Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC) connects people with the history and beauty of Fort Ross & Salt Point State Parks. We are a 501(c)(3) public charity and state park cooperative association. We operate the visitor center and gift shop at the park itself. This incarnation of FRC has been active for about 40 years. We have a few hundred paying members, and a loyal band of volunteers. Beyond our membership, the parks closures had an interesting effect for Fort Ross: it rallied our international constituency to come to our aid. **The threat of park closures, especially at the cusp of the 200th anniversary of the founding of Fort Ross, brought the Russian Ambassador to our park.** He in turn rallied other Russian politicians and Russian-based companies to address this.

How did Fort Ross create these relationships in Russia?

Cultivate professional ties: Over many decades, Fort Ross has cultivated long standing relationships with Russian institutions and individuals, stemming primarily from academic exchanges, grant writing, and a few youth exchange programs, particularly since the end of the Cold War when Russian archives opened up. FRC has partnered with institutions to receive several prestigious grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and other large institutions to study in Russian archives. (It's counter-intuitive, but we work in Russian archives to study our own early California history. This is because the 19th century Russian explorers were very advanced and focused great energy on documenting their travels),

Cultivate personal ties: People invest in a park when we allow people to truly interact with the land. State Parks needs to be more flexible in allowing parks to be used for holidays, for weddings, for those things that help people invest more deeply to the place. For example, the Fort Ross chapel is used for Russian Orthodox services several times a year. I have been told many times, "Thank you for taking such good care of this place," and at some level many Russians believe Fort Ross is still theirs to possess. Fort Ross is symbolically important to old world émigrés and travelers, and many consider visiting this site akin to a pilgrimage. This makes for a very dedicated constituency.

Why do these companies agree to fund Fort Ross, and why do they care?

This is a difficult question to answer with any certainty. For Russians, Fort Ross was their southernmost colony, now only a stone's throw from the San Francisco Bay Area, so they feel a sense of national pride

that Fort Ross was “once theirs.” They want to protect and care for this piece of their heritage. Their people are buried in the Fort Ross cemetery, and this matters.

Russkiy Mir, a very large Russian semi-governmental foundation which is slated to contribute over 75k this year to help Fort Ross Conservancy commemorate the bicentennial, has grant guidelines that read as follows, all of which apply to supporting Fort Ross:

- identification, organization, preservation and popularization of Russian works of art, **historical legacies and events that contribute to the restoration of unity between Russian culture at home and abroad;**
- formation of favorable public opinion about Russia, the spread of knowledge about our home country;
- interaction with the diasporas, promoting a climate of inter-ethnic respect and peace;

Our primary U.S.-based supporter is Chevron, and they’ve been a generous donor to us over the past three years. In addition, Chevron reached out to two of its Russian partners to underwrite a twenty-minute documentary that it donated to FRC so we can sell it in our visitor center. Chevron is also a substantial supporter of many of our events. Chevron is locally based but is also an international company doing business in Russia. When Chevron helps FRC, Chevron can donate the money locally while showing its Russian base it supports this site of international importance.

FRC is very interested in emphasizing Fort Ross as a place of *shared heritage*. It’s our goal to find more American donors so we can continue to emphasize the bi-national nature of the park. Today, the fort is common ground, a place where once adversarial Russians and Americans work together to protect what is a shared historic site.

What are the processes and challenges?

Fort Ross Conservancy is in a good position to respond to donors – we are small, nimble, and very responsive. We often joke that we get the grants because we answer the phone, and I believe there’s truth in that. We have incentive to work to get the grant. We are small enough, and on the ground, so it matters. I suspect that is the case for many nonprofits. The difference between our mode of operation and CSP is so great that now we write the grants for projects that CSP will undertake, even small capital improvement projects. In this way the coop is truly partnering with CSP.

What is the Renova agreement, and how is it working?

Renova is a very successful Russian conglomerate. I first met Renova staff in late 2009 when they came to visit the park, and FRC has been meeting with them regularly since then. Although one rarely sees this in the press, both Fort Ross Conservancy and California State Parks signed Memorandums of Understanding with Renova in 2010. Renova promised \$1 million a year to Fort Ross for at least two

years (2011 and 2012). Since the signing, FRC has received nearly three times more money from Renova than State Parks. We receive this money through grant writing.

In our case we have received approximately \$600,000. from Renova alone over the last 18 months, and that number will be higher by year's end. These funds are typically very project-based (digitizing a library of manuscripts, repairing a trail to the cemetery, upgrading the visitor center), and they are fairly work-intensive. We are willing to put in the time to write and win the grants. And as the relationship has evolved, recently we've been writing grants for projects that CSP will undertake. We get the funds, coordinate the work, and assist CSP.

A not-for-profit is better able to adapt and listen to potential donors. We are more responsive to their requests, and therefore we encourage them to work through us. Most of us come from private industry, which helps immensely.

Does our experience suggest a new model?

Our experience over the last two years absolutely suggests a new model. Let each organization do what it does best. CSP obviously knows how to handle infrastructure and law enforcement, for example, and coops have no place in those arenas. However, not-for-profits have more leeway in how they do the work, more motivation to get the work, and fewer bureaucratic obstacles to block the work. The motto should be "CSP review, then coops do."

In our case we have created a fairly strong partnership, one that has definitely benefited our visitors as well as our district's bottom line. However, it is hard for CSP staffers who have grown up within the old model to fully get on board. I hope that this changes as management realizes the benefits, and the absolute necessity of partnering.

Suggestions for the New Model

Co-ops already exhibit strong incentive to get funding and make things happen. State Parks needs to adapt its model so they too have incentive to open parks and serve the public. Right now our district saves money by closing the park, and only loses money through higher expenses when the park is open. This does not encourage the right behavior. It also makes the co-ops and State Parks feel even more "out of sync."

FRC knows all too well that grants and donors can be fickle, and we cannot rely on donors for our long-term plans. FRC aims to diversify its revenue by creating "fee for service" programming. We need to leverage these good years by creating programming that will add to our revenue stream well into the future. For this we need CSP to meet us at the table and accept us as true partners.

Fort Ross Conservancy has one primary goal: To bring life to Fort Ross. These California State Parks are a public resource. These lands belong to the people of California, and with some creativity and careful planning, they can once again flourish.