On Monday, July 27, 2009, Natalie Lohi, Vice President of CSPRA represented CSPRA at a meeting with DPR executive staff to discuss the impact the current budget situation is having on the field staff. Here is Natalie's synopsis of that meeting.

Thank you Natalie for your dedication to State Parks and to the California State Park Rangers Association. Pam

In attendance: Scott Wassmund, Division Chief; Phil Jenkins, OHMVR Division Chief; Daphne Greene, Dep. Director for OHMVR; Karl Poppelreiter, LEES Chief; Scott Elliott representing SPPOAC Supervisors; Bob Rice, PMC1, representing field maintenance; and Richard Bergstresser, representing SPPOAC.

The meeting was requested by field staff. Those in attendance were from various classifications but the message we brought was a clear and united one – the field staff is at the breaking point. We know that furloughs are not going away; we know there is no money. We went into the meeting with a realistic attitude and focused on three major areas: furlough implementation, service reduction/park closures, and communication.

We asked that there be clarification on how furlough hours can be claimed, for example, less than 8 hours increments is acceptable but that doesn't seem to be clear in all districts. Another request regarding furlough implementation is that employees be given the flexibility to use those days when needed. We discussed the fact that the impact of furloughs is above and beyond financial for many and schedule shuffles to accommodate operational need have significant impacts on our daily lives. The department must consider the "human element" in all of this if it is to retain good employees and secure its own future. In order to do this, we need to allow superintendents the authority to close parks or portions of parks regardless of revenue. This brings me to another topic of discussion - service reduction and closure.

When we begin to talk about closing parks we know we have exhausted all other possibilities. Perhaps that is why we still have not done this. Perhaps we are still hoping for partners and sponsors and maybe that will happen. Those working beyond capacity with 15% reductions feel we have already exhausted all possibilities. During this meeting, everyone was receptive to the idea of possible closures or partial closures or at least open to the discussion. The public has made it clear they still expect the same level of service they are accustom to as long as the gates are open. There is always the fear of making decision now that will be permanent when we are back on our feet but there was a very candid discussion acknowledging the fact that these are unprecedented times and very difficult decisions must be made.

A third focus area of this meeting was communication. The executive staff was surprised and dismayed by the lack of communication “flow’ to the field. In all of the chaos that is our current reality, it is understandable that not all the answers (almost none of the answers) are available. What would be helpful is communicating what is being done, what attempts are being made for exemptions, funding, etc. It would help the field realize the leaders in DPR are fighting for them even if the battles aren’t always won. The “no news is good news” concept certainly does not apply here. “No news” to an employee facing a foreclosure, a rapidly declining 401K, a need for a second job is just another reason to lay awake at night. Information is empowering and providing that information as often as possible is an act of respect. Those of us who are still here, working hard, despite it all deserve that. There wasn’t a person in the room who didn’t agree.

On Monday July 27th, I attended a meeting to represent field staff. The truth is, the discussion applied to all DPR employees. You may be an environmental scientist at MacKerricher State Park, a heavy equipment operator at Carnegie SVRA or work in payroll at headquarters – chances are you are suffering. It is up to our leaders to alleviate some of the operational burden we are all carrying, but it is up to all of us to support one another.