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Bay Area to get new hiking trail in scenic, little-explored wilderness

By Kurtis Alexander

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Conservationists and officials with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission hike on a trail at the San Francisco Peninsula Watershed in San Mateo County on Nov. 29. Stephen Lam/the Chronicle

In the coastal hills of San Mateo County, above Interstate 280 and the Crystal Springs Reservoir, San Francisco's vast watershed lands remain a little-explored wilderness.

The 23,000 acres flush with oaks, redwoods and Douglas fir, offering sometimes dramatic views of the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay, are largely off-limits to the public. A few trails cross the property, but they are mostly on the edges — so as to protect lakes and streams that contribute to the area's water supply.

Next year, however, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission plans to begin construction of a six-mile trail to lift the curtain on more of the closely guarded watershed. The new path, which will run near Skyline Boulevard south of Highway 92, will connect to an existing 10-mile trail that opened 20 years ago — in response to requests from the public to see the land and the many plants and animals it hosts in the absence of humans.

"It was (once) controversial for the city to allow people in," said Tim Ramirez, manager of the Natural Resources and Lands Management Division of the PUC, before leading a tour of the ridge where the new trail will be built. "The watershed has become this super unique ecological resource."

Ramirez began the tour along the future trail route, on a recent morning, bushwhacking through a jumble of tan oaks beneath tall redwoods off Skyline Boulevard near Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve. A spur trail will eventually lead from Skyline Boulevard, also called Highway 35, near the preserve's North Ridge parking area, to the new PUC trail. The trail's first and primary access point and parking lot will be farther north, near Highway 92.

Ramirez and the small group he was leading stepped over logs and pushed up and down steep, tree-covered slopes where the new Southern Skyline Boulevard Ridge Trail will make the terrain easier to navigate. The six-foot-wide dirt and gravel path is scheduled to be completed in 2025. Hikers, bicyclists and equestrians will be welcome. A permit, obtained online, will be required.

With the morning mist still hugging the forest floor, Ramirez and his coworkers listed off a handful of the numerous flora and fauna that have disappeared from other parts of the Bay Area but that visitors might encounter in the watershed: the federally endangered San Bruno elfin butterfly, fountain thistle and the threatened California red-legged frog. A breeding pair of bald eagles also is present.



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A layer of fog is seen among trees where the Southern Skyline Boulevard Ridge Trail is planned in San Mateo County.

The group continued to a ridge top, where stands of tan oak had been cleared after becoming infected with the tree disease Sudden Oak Death. The clearing provided enough of an opening in the forest to offer perspective on the trail route.

From where the existing Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail ends just north of Highway 92, the Southern Skyline Boulevard Ridge Trail will start across the highway and continue six miles south to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area's Phleger Estate.

"There was always a plan to close this gap," Ramirez said.

The link, notably, will mark an addition to the Bay Area Ridge Trail, which is intended to one day circle San Francisco Bay. Just over 400 miles of the proposed 550-mile route are now open.

“It’s enormously significant to make this connection,” said Janet McBride, executive director of the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, who participated in the tour.

McBride noted, though, that busy Highway 92 will make it difficult for thru-hikers or bicyclists to get from the existing PUC trail to the new trail. The water agency and Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, among others, have urged Caltrans, the state’s transportation department, to address the traffic obstacle — possibly with a pedestrian bridge over the road.



A tree with branches covered in moss stands along the Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail in San Mateo County.

Another issue, on the new trail’s southern end, is that no connector trail exists at Phleger Estate. Until a route is established on the federal land, the Southern Skyline Boulevard Ridge Trail will not proceed onto the property.

Planned new trail in San Mateo County

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Map: Todd Trumbull/The Chronicle · Sources: S.F. Public Utilities Commission, OpenStreetMap

PUC officials say part of the reason for building the trail is how much the public has enjoyed the existing Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail. Because that trail, when opened in 2003, represented a significant departure from keeping people out of the heart of the watershed, the agency requires people to be accompanied by docents when visiting. The volunteer docents lead tours three days a week.

The new trail will not require a tour because it travels through less sensitive natural areas. The trail, as planned, never gets farther than a half mile from the road.

“For us, this (public access) is the way we’re able to talk to people about what we do here,” said Ramirez before wrapping up his tour of the future trail route.

The PUC has sought to protect the watershed since 1930, when the city of San Francisco purchased the land from the Spring Valley Water Company. Beyond preserving the wildlands, the agency works with Cal Fire and others to manage for wildfire. Several fuel breaks have been built across the property.

Runoff from the area, which is collected in three reservoirs — Crystal Springs, San Andreas and Pilarcitos — supplements the PUC’s water supplies from Hetch Hetchy and other reservoirs in the Sierra Nevada. The agency provides water to the city as well as communities in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties.

Over the past 20 years, the PUC has counted about 18,000 visitor trips on the Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail. Next year, as part of the trail work being done to the south at a total cost of \$20.5 million, a half-mile loop compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act will be added to the existing trail.



Pilarcitos Lake, a reservoir in the San Francisco water system, is seen from Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail in San Mateo County on Nov. 29.



Ryan Mack, deputy director at the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, hikes along a path where a new trail is planned in the Peninsula watershed area of San Mateo County.

“The thing I hear over and over is, ‘I never knew that this was here,’ ” said Mike Callan, a docent who leads tours on the Fifield-Cahill Ridge Trail. “Lots of times, you come here and there isn’t anyone for miles.”

Callan said the watershed is so pristine that he challenges people in his tour groups to find even a single piece of trash during their excursions. Of the dozens of outings he has led, he said only once did someone find something.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/new-hiking-trail-18500040.php>

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