CITY OF MALIBU
Official Press Release

April 14, 2026

City of Malibu Files Lawsuit to Protect Public Safety, Restore Responsible Trail Management, and Clarify Ownership of Local Trail Easements

(Malibu, CA) - April 14, 2026 - The City of Malibu today filed a civil complaint in Los Angeles County Superior Court against the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), seeking to establish the City's ownership of public trails and trail easements within the City's borders, including along Murphy Way and Winding Way, and to address a long-documented pattern of unsafe and inadequate trail management by MRCA.

This action comes against the backdrop of a series of devastating wildfires that have struck Malibu in recent years, which residents and community leaders have directly linked to MRCA's longstanding failure to manage and clear brush on its lands. In November 2024, the **Broad Fire** originated on MRCA-managed Malibu Bluffs Open Space, burning approximately 50 acres and damaging multiple homes and other structures during dangerous Santa Ana wind conditions. Just weeks later, in December 2024, the **Franklin Fire** erupted north of Pepperdine University along Malibu Canyon Road, adjacent to MRCA-managed parkland, and burned more than 4,000 acres, destroyed 20 homes and other structures, and triggered evacuations for tens of thousands of residents. Both fires spread rapidly through overgrown, unmanaged vegetation on MRCA lands.

At a **public town hall following the** Broad and Franklin Fires, Malibu residents accused the MRCA of allowing vegetation to accumulate as fuel, and called for accountability. The historical pattern of fire risk created by inadequate fuel management on MRCA lands is a documented, recurring, and foreseeable hazard that the City can no longer allow to go unaddressed. State records show that in the year before the Broad and Franklin Fires, less than 200 acres of fuel reduction had been performed across MRCA's approximately 75,000-acre holdings, a fraction of what responsible stewardship requires and what residents have long demanded.

The City's lawsuit seeks quiet title and declaratory relief. California law (Section 989 of the California Streets and Highways Code) provides that all County-held rights in trails within the city limits automatically transferred to the City of Malibu upon its incorporation in 1991. As a result, a 1998 quitclaim deed by which the County purporting to transfer those same interests to SMMC was legally without effect.

As Malibu Mayor Bruce Silverstein explained, "The City did not arrive at this step lightly. For more than a year, we worked collaboratively with MRCA to try to resolve our concerns. When those efforts proved unsuccessful, the City Council concluded that legal action was the only option to effect change." The Mayor added, "As the steward of all public property within the city, Malibu has a responsibility to ensure that property is managed and maintained to protect public safety and environmental resources**.** We have an obligation to act in the best interests of our residents, visitors, and other stakeholders, which means ensuring that the public lands within our community are safe, properly maintained, and responsibly managed. When collaboration failed to produce the necessary changes, we had a duty to act."

The complaint documents specific and ongoing safety failures on MRCA-managed trails, including a chronic, well-documented lack of adequate parking facilities that forces trail users onto Pacific Coast Highway, one of the most dangerous roadways in California. The complaint also identifies MRCA's failure to consistently enforce the required sunset trail closure, which has on occasion left trail users in the dark and prompted calls for emergency assistance.

As early as July 2024, **the City formally warned** MRCA in writing that the lack of parking adjacent to this area and others, with the nearest available parking along PCH when the lot is full, posed significant safety and logistical risks. That letter cautioned that directing visitors to park along PCH and cross on foot was extremely dangerous, noting the high traffic volume in the area and a documented pattern of illegal parking, illegal U-turns, and pedestrians walking along the unimproved shoulder, pinned between parked vehicles and oncoming traffic. MRCA ignored these concerns. On February 8, 2026 Joshua Farmer was struck and killed on PCH near Winding Way in the vicinity of the trails at the center of this lawsuit. The City can no longer accept the status quo.

The **257-page complaint** further alleges that MRCA's management has resulted in environmental damage to sensitive coastal resources, failure to comply with the requirements of the California Coastal Act, inadequate trash removal, and failure to enforce boundaries protecting public open space.

The City emphasizes that this lawsuit reflects a firm but reluctant **last resort** after extended good-faith efforts to resolve these issues cooperatively. Malibu remains committed to open-space preservation, public trail access, and collaborative stewardship of the Santa Monica Mountains. Commencement of this legal action does not change that commitment; it reaffirms it.

In a related lawsuit **filed in February seeking damages in the aftermath of the Palisades Fire,** the City alleges that MRCA failed to perform adequate brush clearance and fuel modification on its parkland holdings in Malibu, the same pattern of neglect at the heart of this suit, including on **vacant lots along Pacific Coast Highway and Big Rock Drive**, in violation of Los Angeles County fire code brush clearance requirements. Malibu residents have formally notified the MRCA of these dangerous conditions in the months and years preceding recent fires. The City contends that this failure to clear overgrown vegetation was a substantial contributing factor to the rapid spread and intensity of recent wildfires, and that it constitutes an **ongoing dangerous condition of public property** for which the MRCA bears responsibility.

It is imperative that MRCA take this responsibility seriously and ensure it is not a source or cause of worsening fires. The City acknowledges that MRCA has recently initiated new brush and vegetation management contracts for 2026 and welcomes those steps, but they are too little, too late. Sustained, comprehensive, and fully compliant fuel management across all of property managed by MRCA is what the law requires and what the community deserves.

The City's objective is clear: to ensure the public trails within the City's borders are safe, well-maintained, environmentally sound, and accessible to everyone who wishes to enjoy them, while also protecting hikers and visitors.

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