

## **Cape Kiwanda background and current safety issue**

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### ***Background***

The State of Oregon purchased Cape Kiwanda for use as a state park in 1973. Today, the park totals 185 acres starting at the south end with a large dune and sandstone cliffs, and ending with a strip of beach on the north.

The sandstone bluffs are vulnerable to erosion from wind, rain, and the ocean. Cliff edges are often undercut, collapsing with little pressure. Rocks, slippery with algae, can send a person into the ocean in a split second. Where the sheer rock faces meet the ocean, falling just a few feet down can put a person out of reach. Wave action can be violent, even if the weather is clear, especially after a storm.

The unincorporated town of Pacific City is on the south side of the park. A popular beach access is used by beachgoers, surfers, and the dory fleet (small, fast boats that launch and land from the sand). Hang gliders are also common in the area. Residential and vacation homes, private camping, and business like the Pelican Pub surround the southern boundary. The county manages a parking area.

A spate of deaths preceded state purchase of the site in 1973. Records are sketchy, but newspaper articles mention 11 deaths from falls to the rocks and ocean from 1960-1972.

After being purchased by the state, park staff worked out a plan to restrict access by building about a mile of fence close to the sandstone cliff edges.

Fencing met with some opposition from locals, photographers, and other people interested in a wild, natural coast. Black-coated chain link was settled on as a compromise to preserve as much of the view as possible.

Portions of the fence didn't stand up well to conditions on the cape. Sand accumulated against the chain link and buried portions of it.

After the original fence was erected, Kiwanda stayed in the news as a natural wonder, but no direct mentions of fatalities were found in the searchable online public media until the 1990s, when deaths occurred in at least 1993 and 1994. Local first responder records probably contain incidents absent from the online record.

In 1996, the decrepit mile-long fence was replaced with a quarter-mile post-and-cable barrier that closed off the tip of the cape—the most prominent and unstable sandstone features associated with the most falls and deaths.

In April 2009, an 18 year old male fell onto the rocks and died. The fence was extended by 60' close to the site of the incident.

After five years without major incidents, a 25-year old male crossed into the fenced off area in April 2014, strung a cable between rocks (a practice called slack lining), fell to the rocks and was swept out to sea. Three more died in 2015; one 17-year old male fell from the cliffs in the closed area in June, and two more—female aged 17 and male aged 22—died unattended in July (so the cause and exact location are not known). Two more (female aged 17 and male aged 19) died in February 2016 after falling from the fenced-off area into the ocean. In the most recent case, one person in a group fell into the ocean, and two would-be rescuers followed. One rescuer and the original victim self-rescued, and the second rescuer died.

Public comment, staff history, and park experience present at least six general options for responding to the rash of incidents.

### *Early detail-free options*

- 1) **Don't change the site:** Allow public attention to raise awareness of the risk.
- 2) **Restrict the area more:** Change the fence height, material, or location to create a stronger barrier.
- 3) **Restrict the area less:** Relocate the fence to give people more access to stable areas of the cape, and better access to the views they're seeking. Increase barriers closer to highest risk areas.
- 4) **Revise and relocate the signs:** Use stronger, more personal language to communicate the sense of loss more powerfully and persuasively.
- 5) **Increase patrols:** Dedicate more law enforcement and park ranger time to the site when weather encourages visits to personally speak to teens and 20-somethings.
- 6) **Off-site communications:** Incorporate strong, consistent safety messages online, at nearby rental properties and campgrounds, and through Pacific City businesses.