

ROLLING ON THE RIVER

RAFTING TRIPS MAY RETURN TO CALAVERAS COUNTY

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MOKELUMNE HILL - One of the largest rafting outfitters in the United States is based in Calaveras County, yet there are no commercial rafting trips on any of the county's rivers.

That may soon change as the federal Bureau of Land Management considers an experimental three-year program that would grant limited commercial permits to raft the Mokelumne River near Mokelumne Hill.

"It is something that has probably needed to happen for a long time," said Jeff Horn, the lead outdoor recreation planner for the bureau's Mother Lode field office. "It is a wonderful resource. The Mokelumne is a beautiful river."

Right now, private kayakers paddle several sections of the river, including the Electra and Middle Bar runs near Highway 49 and the Devil's Nose section further upstream.

But the only guided raft trips have happened under special permits granted for charity fundraising. Those trips, donated by Outdoor Adventure Recreation Specialists, have generated money for the Calaveras Youth Mentoring Program and the Foothill Conservancy.

OARS is an international outfitter based in Angels Camp that decades ago offered rafting trips on the Camp Nine section of the Stanislaus River before that section was inundated by the rising waters of New Melones Lake.

Currently, the rafting company offers commercial trips in seven western states and in a half-dozen foreign countries.

Steve Markle, director of sales and marketing for OARS, said the firm has been pushing for the Bureau of Land Management to grant commercial permits on the Mokelumne in order to give more local residents, especially young people, a chance to get up close to the river.

"We'd like to have a stretch of river we call our own here in Calaveras County," Markle said. "It has been a long time since we've had a reliable summer rafting stretch."

The last time that happened was in the early 1990s when the level of New Melones was so low that it temporarily re-exposed the Camp Nine Run, allowing for limited raft adventures.

Markle said the firm envisions an even smaller trade on the Mokelumne, possibly around 1,500 customers a year.

Recreation on the stretch of river between the Highway 49 bridge and Middle Bar has long been a contentious issue. East Bay Municipal Utility District, which controls Pardee Reservoir and the land at Middle Bar, has prohibited water recreation.

After kayakers were arrested at Middle Bar in 1999 and local attorneys refused to prosecute them, the East Bay utility relented and constructed a parking area and take-out facility at Middle Bar.

East Bay MUD has since proposed that it might someday raise the level of Pardee Reservoir, an action that would inundate the Middle Bar Run. That would eliminate white-water rafting and kayaking as well as inundate a new parking area under construction at Big Bar, west of where the river flows under Highway 49.

River activists, including the Foothill Conservancy, recently won a court ruling that requires the utility to do further study.

Meanwhile, the utility is seeking to protect its facilities and to prevent recreational users from having body contact with water that will be sent ultimately into the faucets of Bay Area homes.

Richard Skyes, director of East Bay MUD Water and Natural Resources, said the utility supports allowing more people on the river.

"We think that it is good public relations for them to have positive recreation experiences wherever they are within the watershed," Sykes said. "Kayaking and rafting already occurs. All we are talking about here is how it occurs with commercial groups and how that can be safely done with no significant impacts."

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