

Popular Mokelumne stretch to open for rafting, kayak trips

By Dana M. Nichols
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SAN ANDREAS - By spring, schoolchildren, grandparents and pretty much anyone else who wants will be able to sign up for rafting trips on a 6-mile section of the Mokelumne River from Electra Powerhouse to Middle Bar.

The federal Bureau of Land Management is now in the final stages of setting up a study that will allow commercial rafting and kayak instruction on the river.

"This river is very special in that it has beautiful scenery, it has gentle rapids and it has access," said George Wendt, the president of Outdoor Adventure River Specialists, a commercial tour company he founded in 1974 in Angels Camp.

Wendt is familiar with this section of the Mokelumne because, for the past nine years, his company has obtained special permits to provide charity fundraising raft trips on it.

"I've taken people over 90 years old down this river," Wendt said.

More than 50 fans and supporters of river recreation turned out to cheer the federal study at a public hearing held last week in Jackson.

The Class II rapids on this section of the Mokelumne are far milder than the Class III, IV and V rapids Wendt's firm navigates on commercial trips all over the world.

Although Wendt and his firm have played a large role in keeping alive the dream of wider recreational access to the Mokelumne, there's no guarantee that Outdoor Adventure River Specialists will be rafting the river next year.

Jeff Horn, a recreation manager for the Bureau of Land Management, said that raft companies will be chosen by lottery to participate in the study. Three will be allowed to operate during the first year of the study and five during the second and third years.

Each firm will be permitted to put in only two times a day, with a maximum of 24 people each time. That means at most 240 people per day will be on the river during the 90 days a year when flows are suitable for rafting and kayaking.

Those flows are guaranteed on weekends during the spring and early summer thanks to a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission license issued in 2000 to Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

"We've got weekend flows that will be controlled, regulated and constant," Horn said.

Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky, whose district is bounded by the river, said that the increased recreation is the result of decades of struggle.

Wilensky, who learned to kayak on the Mokelumne, said he was among those who violated East Bay Municipal Utility District rules when that agency tried to prevent kayakers from navigating as far as Middle Bar.

The conflict between East Bay MUD and kayakers eventually led to a settlement and the construction in 2002 of a parking lot and take-out facility at Middle Bar.

Last year, the federal government finished a new put-in and take-out facility at Big Bar, where Highway 49 crosses the river.

While local business leaders and elected officials say they welcome the money that rafting trips will bring, others said that well-heeled tourists won't be the only ones in the rafts.

Wendt and others say they plan to have many opportunities for local children to learn about the river and how to care for it.

"We are looking for an opportunity for an outdoor classroom," said Jim Casey, a teacher at West Point Elementary School.

Rebecca Willis, Calaveras County's planning director, suggested that the Bureau of Land Management require raft operators to educate their customers about water quality.

That's exactly the kind of suggestion Horn wants. He urged those present at the meeting to send him written comments by Aug. 15.

The study already requires tour operators to take a variety of measures to protect the river and the lands along it. Buses, for example, are banned on the narrow roads in the area to avoid damaging them. Tour operators are allowed only vans with up to 15 passengers.

Horn also said rangers will be policing the river and, if the study finds the raft trips are damaging the river, then managers may reduce their numbers or eliminate them completely.

River rafting plan

Read about the proposed three-year trial period for commercial rafting on the Mokelumne River online at blm.gov/ca/motherlode. On the right, click on "NEPA Documents" and then scroll down to "Mokelumne River Study."

Written comments on the plan are due by Aug. 15. Send them to BLM archaeologist James J. Barnes at jjbarnes@blm.gov or by mail to 5152 Hillside Circle, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762.

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