

\$235 million Yosemite Valley renovation plan unveiled

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

The National Park Service is calling for a \$235 million renovation of world-renowned Yosemite Valley – featuring a pedestrian underpass near Yosemite Falls and a limit on visitors during crowded times.

The changes are part of the embattled Merced River Plan, a draft of which was released Tuesday. Yosemite Lodge, listed for removal in an earlier option, will be retained. There will be more campsites, too.

But popular Curry Village Ice Rink will be torn out. Bicycle and raft rentals also will go away, though visitors still can bring their bikes and rafts, said Kathleen Morse, Yosemite chief of planning.

“There’s a limited amount of space in Yosemite Valley,” she said. “People are more interested in day-use parking and more campsites.”

The \$235 million would come from several Yosemite National Park income sources, including entrance and concessions franchise fees, leaders said. No additional money is needed from Congress, they said. The projects will be spread out over 15 to 20 years, Morse added.

This is the third time the park service has written the Merced River Plan. The previous two were stopped by a lawsuit, which succeeded in forcing the park service to specify a visitor limit.

The activist group Friends of Yosemite Valley led the legal protests. Representatives spoke with park officials throughout

the planning process. However, activists declined immediate comment because they had not yet seen the 2,500-page draft environmental document.

In the last decade or so, more than 10,000 people have commented on the park's proposals for protecting the Merced River, the main stream through the 7-square-mile valley.

About 4 million people visit Yosemite each year, and up to 70 percent pass through the valley to see iconic landmarks such as El Capitan, Half Dome and Yosemite Falls.

The public will have until April 18 to comment on the draft environmental document for the plan. By court order, Yosemite must have a final plan in place by late July.

Officials say they are optimistic that the plan will pass muster this time, but there is no guarantee that another lawsuit will not be filed.

Morse said that in creating the plan over the last three years, federal leaders had dozens of public meetings in many cities and paid more than \$1 million for further research.

"It's the most extensive outreach and research I've seen," said Morse, a 25-year veteran of public service.

The visitor limit is 19,900 visitors per day, just shy of the 20,900 peak estimated in 2011, Morse said. To keep an eye on crowding, park rangers will monitor the traffic and parking while communicating with park service employees about incoming visitors at the gates.

When the valley becomes too congested, cars will be diverted to a new parking area on the west end of the valley, Morse said. Or visitors can go to other parts of Yosemite, including Glacier Point or Tuolumne Meadows.

Gate closures and day-use permits are not among the features in the preferred alternative of the draft environmental

document.

Morse said day-use parking will increase from 2,337 spaces to 2,448, and campsites would go from 466 to 640. About 200 acres of meadows and riverside areas will be restored, she said.

The pedestrian underpass at Northside Drive will eliminate a bottleneck that backs up traffic as people cross the street from Yosemite Lodge to view Yosemite Falls.

“The concern is not that there is too much traffic,” Morse said. “It’s a bad intersection because a lot of vehicles leaving the valley must pass through.”