

McClintock against expanding Yosemite

By Michael Doyle, Fresno Bee

WASHINGTON – A bill to expand Yosemite National Park has won the support of California’s senators, but there’s apparent skepticism from the conservative congressman who now represents the park region.

The Capitol Hill split could hinder the park expansion legislation that lawmakers will soon re-introduce. More broadly, it underscores the challenges looming as Yosemite aficionados and Rep. Tom McClintock get to know one another, like partners in an arranged marriage.

“We look forward to working with the congressman so he understands the issues,” Mariposa County Supervisor Kevin Cann said.



Yosemite National Park only recently became part of Rep. Tom McClintock’s district.
Photo/LTN file

McClintock, R-Elk Grove, visited Yosemite this week for his first time as the park’s congressman. The 56-year-old career lawmaker met with park officials for about two hours before

attending a Mariposa town hall meeting Tuesday night.

The world famous park fell into McClintock's 4th Congressional District when a state commission redrew legislative lines last year. The district now includes a big sweep of the Sierra Nevada mountains, from Lake Tahoe in the north to Sequoia National Park in the south. Yosemite is the district's crown jewel, one that repeatedly invites political intervention.

Last Congress, for instance, the lawmaker who represented Yosemite at the time – Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock – introduced a bill to authorize the park service to acquire 18 acres for a new Yosemite visitors center in Mariposa.

McClintock didn't like that proposal. A member of the House Natural Resources Committee, he argued at a hearing last June that the park service would be better off using existing vacant buildings in Mariposa, and he asserted a new Mariposa center would put gateway communities in Madera and Tuolumne counties at a disadvantage.

"Why would we be having the federal government build yet another office facility?" McClintock asked, adding that "this is a plan that picks one winner out of many losers."

A member of the Mariposa Tea Party Patriots shared McClintock's skepticism and testified against the bill at the House hearing. The legislation died, and it has not been re-introduced.

McClintock did not respond to multiple requests for an interview or information over the past week.

He told Mariposa County supervisors on Tuesday that he would seek an investigation "to fully expose" a Yosemite plan that restricts certain commercial operations.

The congressman's staff has reportedly already communicated to park advocates that he won't support a separate Yosemite bill

that will resurface in a few days.

The legislation, to be introduced by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, in the House and by California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein in the Senate will OK buying about 1,600 acres in Mariposa County for an addition to the park. The land is near a development called Yosemite West, and was reportedly part of naturalist John Muir's original plan for Yosemite.

"We haven't made an expansion to the park in over 85 years," said Laurie Wayburn, president of the Pacific Forest Trust. "I think this would be an extraordinary opportunity to get ready for the 2016 celebration of the park's centennial."

The Pacific Forest Trust owns about half of the land covered by the bill, and a partnership of medical professionals owns the other half. The bill authorizes the land purchase by the park service, but does not mandate it.

"This has been something that has been discussed for some time," Costa said, "and it's got bipartisan support."

Costa added that "it would be very good" if McClintock supported the bill, which has been backed by Mariposa County supervisors. Wayburn, though, said McClintock's staff has indicated he doesn't support the park expansion.

In general, McClintock believes the federal government is too big. He is also critical of park service officials, as when he denounced Lassen Volcanic National Park wildland fire managers last year as "people who lack the simple common sense that God gave a squirrel," following a blaze that blew out of control.

McClintock, without fanfare, introduced his own initial Yosemite-related bill last month. The measure would rename Mammoth Peak as Mount Jessie Benton Fremont. The mountain re-naming bill, which does not have any co-sponsors, would honor the 19th century woman whose writings helped inspire Yosemite protection efforts.

A 12,117-foot landmark near Kuna Lake, Mammoth is Yosemite's sixth-highest peak. It's been officially called Mammoth Peak since 1932, according to the Board on Geographic Names' records.

McClintock publicly articulated some other intentions at the town meeting, including possible legislation blocking the park's Merced River plan. The plan calls for the elimination of some Yosemite Valley commercial ventures, including an ice rink and bike rental operations.

"I want to sound the alarm over proposals for Yosemite from the National Park Service," McClintock told Mariposa County supervisors Tuesday. "Yosemite belongs to the American people, and the park service's job is to welcome and accommodate them, not to restrict and harass them."