

# Yosemite river plan delayed 5 months

By Alexei Koseff, Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON – Facing flak for proposing to eliminate some popular tourist amenities in Yosemite National Park, the National Park Service said it needed five more months to finish a plan to “protect and enhance” the Merced River, which runs for 81 miles inside the park.

Kathleen Morse, the park’s chief of planning, said Tuesday that officials intended to complete the plan by the end of the year rather than this month.

The effort to restore the river corridor and habitat to their natural states has been overshadowed by controversy, she said. The proposals include removing or relocating popular tourist concessions that are too close to the riverbank – such as bike and raft rentals, two swimming pools, a snack stand, an ice skating rink and some hiking trails. The plan also would add new walk-in campgrounds and increase day-use parking.

“It’s unfortunate that there isn’t more discussion about the positive things coming out of the plan,” Morse said, such as easing the gridlock that often greets drivers in Yosemite, which draws 4 million visitors a year.

The park service is preparing the plan under a 1987 law that designated the Merced as a “wild and scenic” river, giving it a high level of federal protection. Local environmental groups had successfully challenged two previous plans in court as inadequate.

Local business groups and others have criticized the latest blueprint as harmful to commercial operations in and around Yosemite.

"The issue is public enjoyment of public lands," Rep. Tom McClintock, a Republican who represents the district that includes Yosemite, said Tuesday at a hearing of the House subcommittee on public lands and environmental regulation.

The plan, he said, represents "a new elitist maxim: 'Look, but don't touch. Visit, but don't enjoy.'"

Several witnesses argued that the changes would hurt nearby communities that are economically dependent on the park. They said officials preparing the plan had ignored their concerns.

"People don't believe in the park service," said Brian H. Ouzounian, representing the Yosemite Valley Campers Coalition, which promotes drive-in campgrounds and other family camping.

Jonathan B. Jarvis, director of the National Park Service, disputed that notion. He said two-thirds of the 30,000 comments submitted by the public supported the draft plan.

Jarvis said visitors would still be allowed to use rafts, bikes and horses inside the park, but they would need to bring their own rather than rent them.

McClintock produced a letter from retired congressman Tony Coelho, a Democrat who wrote the bill giving the Merced federal protection. Coelho, now a lobbyist, wrote that he "never intended" for the law to apply to the Merced River inside Yosemite, only to the river outside the park.

"Yosemite Valley has never been wilderness," Coelho wrote.

Jarvis said Coelho's intent did not matter.

"We have to go with the plain language of the statute," he said. The law "covers the entire length of the river through Yosemite Valley."