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Right for rafting?

Input sought on whitewater plan between Camp Nine and New Melones Reservoir



River Runners guide Daniel Jenkins rafts on the Camp Nine section of the Stanislaus River above New Melones Reservoir in July 2014. (River Runners Inc. / Courtesy photo)



Before New Melones Dam was completed, whitewater rafting and kayaking were popular in the Camp Nine area to the old Parrotts Ferry Bridge, where as many as 40 outfitters guided trips on Class III rapids through the deepest limestone canyon in the western United States.

Now, federal custodians of New Melones Reservoir are beginning the process to allow local whitewater outfitters to ramp up commercial boating operations on the main stem Stanislaus River below Camp Nine.

Check it out

The draft environmental assessment was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. It can be viewed online at http://www.usbr.gov/mp/nepa/nepa_projdetails.cfm?Project_ID=25758.
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The Bureau of Reclamation issued a 45-page draft environmental assessment for the proposed plan on Wednesday.

They are proposing to issue limited special event permits, when water level conditions allow through 2026, for up to four outfitters to evaluate compatibility and opportunities for whitewater boating management between Camp Nine and the Mark Twain recreation area near the Stevenot Bridge on Highway 49.

Until the 1990s and more recently, New Melones Reservoir flooded the scenic stretch of the Stanislaus River. Conditions in the canyon have changed, due to the reservoir and its reach upstream into the former riverbed.

Now, due to drought conditions that persisted from 2013 to 2015, low water levels at New Melones mean whitewater sports are again possible on the Stanislaus, according to Bureau of Reclamation staff.

How viable is the federal plan as proposed? That depends on which commercial outfitters you talk to.

OARS

Steve Markle, a spokesman for OARS in Angels Camp, said he had not heard about the Bureau of Reclamation plan until Wednesday. He welcomed the news.

“It’s great the Bureau of Reclamation is considering this opportunity for local outfitters,” Markle said. “If conditions are right, then OARS would be interested in looking at the opportunity further. It depends on whether it’s a viable commercial run, based on the upstream releases.”

In terms of water volume in the Stanislaus, it would take between 700 cubic feet per second to 2,000 cfs for at least two to three hours the morning of a run, “to get guests down to the river, geared up and ride the bubble down to the reservoir,” Markle said.

Other considerations would include where the reservoir level is and how long the trip is, a half day or a full day, Markle said.

“Do we have time to stop for lunch, and what overall costs might be for a program like this, is there a fee structure, what it would cost to have a boat tow us to the takeout, gearing up and staffing up, and getting word out about a whitewater run that’s been inundated by a reservoir basically the past 20 years,” Markle said.

The Camp Nine run did come back in the 1990s, Markle said, to the point where OARS staff were guiding 5,000 people a year on that section of the main stem Stanislaus.

OARS was founded in the Grand Canyon, offering multi-day expeditions on the Colorado River in the 1960s, Markle said. The company moved to Angels Camp to be closer to the Stanislaus, which used to be the most popular rafting destination in the West.

“We moved to Angels Camp in 1974 to base our operations on the Stanislaus River, so the company has been here ever since,” Markle said. “The loss of the Stanislaus had a devastating effect on the company. But it also inspired our founder, George Wendt, to offer trips on other rivers across the West and to take part in efforts to protect those rivers from a similar demise, to what happened here on the Stanislaus.”

A flow gauge Wednesday was showing 975 cfs at Camp Nine “and that’s a great level,” Markle said. “We’re not in a position to run any trips out there right now, but that’s a great level. That’s either more water coming in from the snowmelt, or people cranking their air conditioners.”

During periods of peak demand, utilities can request more water releases from dams in Stanislaus watersheds to create more electricity.

ARTA

Steve Welch is general manager for ARTA River Trips in Groveland, and he's less enthusiastic about the potential for resuming commercial operations on the Stanislaus River above New Melones, as outlined by the Bureau of Reclamation.

"Yes, we've been monitoring proceedings, but, to be honest, the Camp Nine stretch presents even more environmental variables than most rivers, so it isn't a high priority," Welch said Wednesday.

"Add New Melones Lake level to the release schedule and road and access issues and the whole thing becomes marginal at best," Welch said. "Plus, the river has suffered significantly from the inundation, so . . .

"I don't foresee a day in the near future when the Camp Nine stretch of the Stanislaus is as much of an economic engine as it was back in the 1970s," Welch said. "It may become raftable again, but it won't be magical again in our lifetimes."

River Runners Inc.

Sarah Vardaro, 35, and John Kosakowsky, 38, are guides and directors of River Runners Inc. They are married residents of Placerville and they've been down the Camp Nine section of the main stem Stanislaus about a half-dozen times in recent years.

Vardaro said she did it one time when the reservoir level was high, and five times when it was low.

"When it's high it would be difficult commercially to do the trip, because the rapids are flooded out," Vardaro said. "Imagine a bathtub is flooding into the river, so the water is flat and the flat water is backing further upstream, so there are less rapids. Rapids are why people go whitewater rafting. When it's high, there's a long paddle out to the takeout."

The times she ran the Camp Nine section in low water conditions were fun, educational and felt more adventurous, Vardaro said.

“You get to see what happens to a river environment when it’s under water for a couple decades,” said Vardaro, who is originally from Adelaide, Australia. “You’d see a forest of dead trees that’s normally under water, still standing. The next time I went out, the trees were falling down. Exposed to the air they started decaying.”

Some grass, trees and vegetation had started growing on newly exposed banks of the reservoir, Vardaro said. Lots of birds came out, including hawks and eagles, to hunt and scavenge for food.

“It felt like things were regenerating,” Vardaro said.

The prospect of working with the Bureau of Reclamation to bring more people on guided trips along the Stanislaus River above New Melones sounds interesting, she said.

“I’m really excited for any opportunity for any river to be opened up for recreation by individuals and commercial outfitters,” Vardaro said. “I feel it raises awareness of issues that affect river environments and gets people interested in those things.

“Going out there, we always frame our trips,” she said. “You can frame this Stanislaus trip as an adventure, an exploration of an area that’s been underwater for so long it’s unknown for a lot of people. For river guides, the Stanislaus is a special place because you hear these stories of how beautiful it was. They used to spend three days going down the river. It’s a place that’s important to the whitewater rafting community, because that is where it’s started here in California.”

Flows will not change

It’s important to note that flows on the Middle Fork Stanislaus River above Camp Nine are controlled in part by technicians with Tri-Dam Project, a partnership of Oakdale Irrigation District and South San Joaquin Irrigation District, which own and operate

reservoirs impounded by Beardsley Dam and Donnell's Dam. Tri-Dam also owns and operates Tulloch Reservoir and Tulloch Dam below New Melones.

Beardsley was completed in 1957. Donnell's was completed in 1958.

If the Bureau of Reclamation proposed plan is approved, whitewater outfitters will be able to obtain special event permits when flow and water level conditions on the main stem Stanislaus River are favorable for whitewater boating.

“Favorable water conditions will be determined at the discretion of the outfitters, and flows will not be regulated to accommodate whitewater boating,” Bureau of Reclamation staff said.

Plainly speaking, the Bureau of Reclamation does not manage streamflows in the Stanislaus River watershed upstream from New Melones. The bureau also does not manage New Melones Reservoir's level for whitewater boating on the river.

“We do not manage to ‘make the run come back’ at all,” staff at the bureau's Central California Area Office said Wednesday. “Therefore, we cannot estimate how many days there would likely be available for whitewater boating.”

Typically, some boating is available most summers.

According to Bureau of Reclamation staff, some commercial outfitters have expressed preferences for flows in the range of 1,000 to 2,000 cfs, which could be realized with contributions from Tri-Dam, Northern California Power Agency, and/or Pacific Gas & Electric in combinations.

The Bureau of Reclamation does not coordinate with Tri-Dam or other hydropower releases upstream and, for that matter, the releases will normally not be announced by those agencies in advance.

The river has continued to be used for noncommercial boating since New Melones was developed, at times when the reservoir is particularly low in elevation. Over the years, whitewater boating has occurred during ideal reservoir conditions.

The Stanislaus River, when it is not inundated by New Melones, offers “generally forgiving to fairly difficult” rafting runs, according to the Bureau of Reclamation. Depending on seasonal water fluctuations, commercial rafting companies can offer organized guided raft trips down the river.

Most whitewater boating consists of organized permittees that provide day-long, guided raft trips. Individuals also kayak and raft the river and reservoir without permits.

Big Stan Basin

The Bureau of Reclamation describes the Stanislaus River as a natural boundary between Calaveras and Tuolumne counties, where it drains an area of about 980 square miles on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. The Stanislaus River basin has three major tributaries, the North, South and Middle forks, and its average annual discharge is close to 1 million acre-feet of water. One acre-foot is enough to flood a typical football field 12 inches deep.

The draft document released Wednesday focuses on assessing environmental consequences of issuing permits to commercial outfitters so they can evaluate opportunities for an intermittent whitewater boating program on the Camp Nine run.

The proposed action would use existing roads to transport customers, outfitters staff, and equipment along highways 4 and 49, Parrotts Ferry Road and Camp Nine Road, including the access route to the Mark Twain Recreation Area on former Highway 49.

Camp Nine Road extends about nine miles from Parrotts Ferry Road to the Collierville Power Plant.

The put-in would be below Camp Nine Road near Mile 8 and the former Camp Nine Bridge, which was removed in 2008.

Proposed operations would involve putting boats into the river at a three-rail raft slide downstream from the former bridge.

Stops would be allowed where desired, along shorelines of the river and reservoir for lunch or relaxing on day trips, Bureau of Reclamation said. No camping or open flames would be allowed as part of the trips.

Boats would navigate downstream to New Melones Reservoir, where they would contact pre-arranged services to tow them to the Mark Twain recreation area take-out.

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