

# Wilder Ranch hiking trails victim of state budget cuts

## Local officials say cuts may only be the beginning

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1-2-92  
SANTA CRUZ — Hikers, bikers and horse riders expressed shock and disbelief Thursday at the closing of 38 miles of trails at Wilder Ranch State Park.

A second victim of the state parks budget crunch is the newly opened 63-site campground at Manresa State Park Beach, which will close for at least the winter season.

Outright closure of The Forest of Nisene Marks is being discussed as well, local park officials said, and drastic cuts in lifeguard services at eight local state park beaches are almost certain later

this year.

Local officials warn the cutbacks may be only the beginning, saying that deeper cuts may be coming if the state Legislature holds to Gov. Pete Wilson's "no new taxes" mandate.

Bikers, hikers and equestrians who use the Wilder Ranch trails were surprised and upset by the news.

"I ride up there a lot. Thanks for the terrible news," said equestrian Patsy Wilkes.

"No way!" said bicyclist Piet Canin.

"It really sucks," said Joseph Gray, hiking at Wilder Ranch Thursday, unaware that the trails were off limits.

Enforcement of the park closure will

be difficult, park officials conceded, if park users simply choose to ignore the signs.

With no patrols scheduled for the area, there's little to stop them. And bicyclists said that at the privately owned Grey Whale Ranch nearby, signs, gates and barbed wire haven't kept hikers and mountain bikers out.

Local bicycling and equestrian organizations said they will fight the closures.

Statewide, the parks system has been struggling under a \$30.2 million budget cut imposed by the governor this fiscal year, and expects to have to trim another \$22 million from its 1992-93 budget.

Please see BUDGET — A12



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Levon Durr and Joseph Gray enjoy a hike at Wilder Ranch Thursday.

## Budget cuts

Continued from Page A1

Fees have already been raised, said Bob Culbertson, Chief Ranger of the Pajaro Coast State Park District, and the governor has said he's opposed to raising taxes.

Cuts in service are all that's left. "We're at a point where we can't cut back without closing something," Culbertson said Thursday, confirming the local closures.

"Effective yesterday (Wednesday), we've closed the uplands campground at Manresa State Beach and the back country at Wilder Ranch," he said. "The only area open (at Wilder) is the cultural complex."

That area is staffed by the nearly 100 volunteer docents who give tours and demonstrations of old-time farm life at the partially restored dairy farm.

Although the coastal district has steadily increased its revenues — from \$900,000 two years ago to the \$1.6 million projected for this year — the district still must make some \$500,000 in cuts, Culbertson said.

The Wilder Ranch and Manresa Beach closures will save some \$300,000 this year, he said. A hiring and spending freeze and cuts in maintenance and operations will make up the balance.

Representatives of the 220-member Santa Cruz County Cycling Club and the 400-member county Horseman's Association say members have donated countless hours — and dollars — to maintain and patrol the trails in the park.

"We understand the budget thing, but there's got to be another way," said Marc Duisenberg of the cycling club. "... We're going to work hard to re-open it."

Beachgoers may be not

the effects of the cutbacks, Culbertson said, in the form of less lifeguard service.

The district has already spent most of its \$156,000 aquatics budget for the year. After \$35,000 was axed, just \$23,000 remains to pay for lifeguards through June at the district's eight state beaches: Palm, Sunset and Manresa beaches, and beaches at Seacliff, Rio del Mar, New Brighton, Twin Lakes and Natural Bridges.

Culbertson said the district will either will have to significantly cut back on the amount of lifeguard service, or divert money from other programs.

"We're not going to close beaches," Culbertson said. "But we won't have the same level of guarding."

For example, instead of five open lifeguard towers at Twin Lakes State Beach, the district may keep one or two towers open, with another lifeguard in a vehicle going between them.

No closures have been announced in the Santa Cruz Mountains district, which supervises the county's mountain and redwood parks, said director Bud Getty.

Both Henry Cowell and Big Basin state parks seem safe from the threat of cutbacks, Getty said, but The Forest of Nisene Marks, a Mid-County redwood sanctuary popular with bikers, joggers and picnickers, appeared on a recent statewide "hit list" of parks being proposed for closing.

"I hope it's unlikely," Getty said. "But it is one of the parks being studied for closure."

Getty said closure of Nisene Marks would save the district only \$50,000, most of which is the salary of the one ranger who patrols it.

That decision is expected sometime in the next month, Getty said, and he is fighting the proposed closing.

Partial closure may be in the future for Castle Rock State park and the Rancho del Oso section of Big Basin Park, Getty said.

Getty said worried people are already writing letters about the possible Nisene Marks closure.

"They're nervous about the thought of the park being there, people using it, and no one patrolling it," he said. "Somehow or other we've got to keep using it."

Local high school students Levon Durr, 17, and Gray, 18, hiking at Wilder Ranch Thursday, said that signs wouldn't keep them out.

"I'll still come here," Durr said. "Somebody's got to enjoy this land," said Gray. "It's some of the nicest in the county."

The Wilder Ranch property was bought by the state in 1974, and was spared from becoming a 10,000-home development through the efforts of a citizens' group. The 2,300-acre property remained closed for years because the state could not afford to open it. A general plan was made in 1980. Money to restore the Victorian farmhouse was authorized in 1988, and the bunkhouse and workshop area have also been restored. Equestrian, mountain biking and hiking trails were then made available to enthusiasts in 1990.

Culbertson said other plans for the property have been put on hold. Those plans include 350 campsites at various locations in the 3,500-acre ranch, a day-use parking lot and restrooms at Four-Mile Beach and development of horseback campgrounds in the uplands.