

Fewer campsites urged for Wilder Ranch

By ROBIN MUSITELLI

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The number of campsites should be reduced, but generally, converting a sand quarry into a campground for Wilder Ranch State Park is better for the environment than locating campsites on the coastal bluffs.

That's the conclusion of a study released Wednesday on the proposal by Graniterock, Inc. to develop a campground at the quarry next to the state park.

The study recommended fewer campsites — 260 instead of the pro-

posed 380 — at the quarry. About 260 campsites already are approved, but not built, at the park.

Overall, the study found no dire impacts from the proposed campground, but warned that noise and dust from ongoing quarry operations would be a problem for campers unless mitigating steps are taken.

The study, a draft environmental impact report, did contain an unexpected revelation — plans for an overnight horse campground and horse rental facility. Opponents said they were unaware of these aspects of the development.

"This equestrian business is another new surprise," said Bruce Bratton, a Bonny Doon resident who is heading efforts to block the campground. State parks officials and Graniterock developers "weren't honest enough to tell the people here and give us a full picture of what they were planning," Bratton charged.

Bratton and other critics maintain the campground would essentially be a huge RV park with more people than the 300 who live up the coast in Davenport.

The study was performed by Strelow Consulting of Santa Cruz for the

state parks department. Among its other findings:

- Traffic on Mission Street would increase less than 3 percent and would not choke movement of cars at any intersection;

- The quarry campground could mean eliminating camping sites already approved in other more environmentally sensitive areas of the park;

- No environmentally sensitive habitat or species is within any of the areas proposed for development;

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- The development is in keeping with county coastal policies, and the increase in expected visitors would be within the park's capacity.

As quarry operator, Graniterock proposes to develop the campground in phases over 15 years.

The firm would deed its 300-acre property next to Wilder Ranch to the state Department of Parks and Recreation, lease back the land, develop the campground, run it for 35 years and then turn the entire operation over to the park.

Graniterock would retain a 15-year mining lease for 60 of the 300 acres, where mining would continue.

The proposal includes 380 campsites — all but 20 of them with hookups for recreational vehicles — an environmental education center with dorms for 160 students, a small restaurant, store, maintenance facility and a horse stable and rental operation.

Campground sites would be developed at the quarry instead of locating 265 campsites approved at Four Mile Beach and on marine terraces near Major Creek, a gain of 115 campsites, if the higher figure is used. An 80-bed hostel approved but not yet built at Four Mile Beach would be eliminated.

With 380 campsites, the camp-



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ground would accommodate up to 1,140 people. During the first few years, the occupancy rate is expected to be about 40 percent.

The proposed development would relocate or eliminate facilities that were part of the Wilder Ranch State Park general plan, although there are several new elements — the equestrian center, the environmental education center and enlargement of an existing agricultural reservoir at Four Mile Beach and expansion of a trail along the bluffs from Fern Grotto.

The equestrian center would include a 2,600-square-foot barn and covered box stalls for up to 50 horses. Up to 10 horses could be

accommodated for overnight camping to allow equestrians convenient access to park trails, including nearly 10 miles of planned equestrian trails.

The equestrian center would be built east of the campground next to a historic barn and cowboy house, complementing existing horse activities in the park.

The study recommends a different location, on an agricultural field between the campground and quarry. It also recommends eliminating the overnight horse camping, saying horses could harm the wetlands.

State Parks planner Roger Callo-way said his department added the equestrian center to the plan during the past year because of public demand. The horse business would be run as a concession, he said.

State parks director Donald Murphy said the environmental report confirmed the benefits of the quarry campground and hailed the proposal as a "prototype for future public/private joint ventures."

"It will provide an enhanced opportunity for Californians to camp near the beach, while allowing us to protect important coastal terrace resources and preserve views of the Santa Cruz coast which would be disturbed by the originally planned campground at Four Mile Beach," said Murphy.