

LOCAL NEWS

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Business group focuses on dam's future

By **BRIAN SEALS**
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A party to raise funds for a Ben Lomond park is taking on urgent meaning as the community's businesses take a stand to keep a popular swimming hole open.

The "Evening in the Park" event scheduled Aug. 31 will raise funds to pay for a study on fish habitat in the San Lorenzo River near a seasonal dam that forms the reservoir.

That study is a precursor to an environmental report the state says is needed before it can grant a new permit to allow a seasonal dam to be placed in the river in coming summers.

"We'd be unhappy and discouraged to see a summer recreation point disturbed that has been there for 80 years," said Bill Pedersen, president of the Ben Lomond Business Association.

The county places a temporary dam on the river generally from Memorial Day to Labor

Day. It creates a swimming hole that draws visitors from around the region. The water is also an emergency reservoir for fighting fires.

However, the state permit that allows the dam to be in the river will expire in June 2003.

With the county financially strapped, the Ben Lomond Business Association is funding a \$20,000 habitat study.

"The study will be turned over to the county to move forward the re-permitting process," Pedersen said.

Both the state Department of Fish and Game and the federal National Marine Fisheries Service are concerned about the impact the dam has on steelhead.

The county was considering funding an environmental study to keep the dam as a summer fixture, but that changed earlier this year when budget cuts sliced deep into the parks department.

"We ran into those budget issues," said Supervisor Jeff Almquist, who represents the district and said he would like to see the dam

return. "Even if someone does the study, there are no assurances the permitting authority will agree the analysis was correct." A five-year permit for the dam was granted in 1998. At the same time the state Fish and Game Department was sued successfully in 1998 by environmentalists that said its policy on altering stream banks should conform to the state's Environmental Quality Act, said Kevan Urquhart, senior biologist with Fish and Game in Monterey.

Since then, the Fish and Game Department has required environmental reports on stream permits that used to be renewed routinely.

Meanwhile, the National Marine Fisheries Service told the county in late 2000 that it was concerned about the dam's impact on fish because it was a barrier to the fish getting upstream. The agency said the county should either not put the dam there or provide a way to allow fish to swim upstream.

Despite the long odds, the Ben Lomond Business Association is forging ahead with its study

Evening in the Park

WHAT: Event to raise funds for fish-habitat study on San Lorenzo River near seasonal dam.

WHEN: 5-9 p.m., Sunday, Aug. 31.

WHERE: Ben Lomond Park.

WHO: Sponsored by the Ben Lomond Business Association.

COST: \$15.

FEATURES: Souvenir wine glass with admission; 15 wineries offering tastes of their products; silent auction, music.

and hopes other organizations in that area will help them with costs.

"Our desire is to get the process moving so we can be renewed for next year," Pederson said.

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