

Big Basin closure would be disaster for merchants

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

BOULDER CREEK — San Lorenzo Valley merchants stand to lose millions in sales next summer if the antiquated sewage treatment plant at Big Basin State Park isn't fixed by June.

If the treatment plant isn't renovated by June, the state Water Quality Control Board says it will order Big Basin to close. But if the park closes, merchants in Felton, Ben Lomond and Boulder Creek say they could lose up to \$15 million in sales made to the 1.3 million park-bound tourists that drive through the valley annually.

"That's one-third of the valley's gross revenues ... we're looking at 150 to 200 jobs lost," said Boulder Creek jeweler Bill Gutzwiller, who calculated the potential losses with the help of economic analyst Ed Astone. "It could be potentially devastating."

Park officials say the treatment plant renovations will not be finished by June and that if Big Basin is open next summer, they plan on cutting attendance by as much as half next summer.

Over the past five years, Big

Basin's out-of-date treatment plant has dumped an estimated 123,000 gallons of raw sewage into Waddell Creek. Park officials' ongoing neglect of the problem resulted in a \$600,000 fine against the park by the water quality board in September.

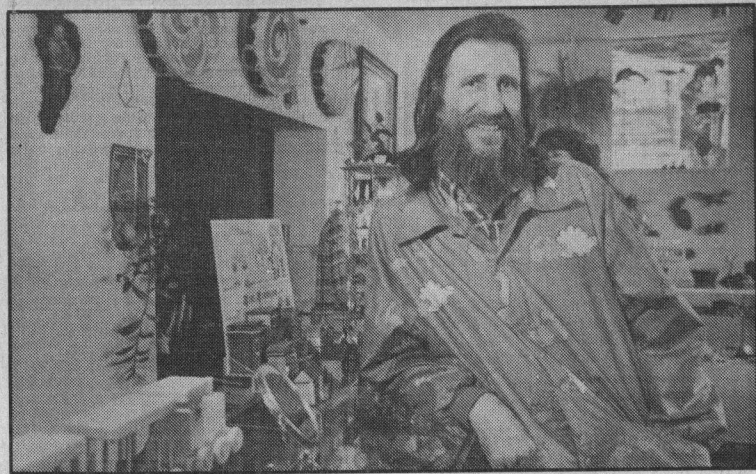
The fine could be suspended if the treatment plant is fixed by June, but if it's not, the board says it will shut the park down and use the \$600,000 to fix the problem itself.

In the meantime, Big Basin is limited to releasing 15,000 gallons of treated sewage into Waddell Creek instead of its usual 37,000 gallons per day. So even if the park doesn't close entirely, it will almost certainly operate at half capacity — or less — next year.

Park officials say they are working as fast as they can on the repairs, but there is no way they'll be done by June.

"I don't think anybody believes we'll be done by June," said State Parks District Supervisor Bud Getty. The job cannot be done before September at the soonest, Getty said.

"We hope we'll be well into it by June, and the board will show



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Jeweler Bill Gutzwiller says merchants need information.

us some good will" and refrain from closing the park down, he said.

The park will have to "trim attendance this summer, possibly by half," Getty said.

Despite the financial problems ahead, area merchants are not asking that Big Basin be let off the hook for its ongoing pollution of Waddell Creek.

"The park system is mandated by law to protect and preserve the environment, and we trusted them," Gutzwiller said. "Then we find that the park is actually one of the biggest polluters in the county, and that's tragic."

But at the same time, merchants are wondering how severe the coming financial crisis will be, and how they're going to weather it. Gutzwiller is rallying area business organizations and

San Lorenzo Valley Supervisor Fred Keeley to search for an area-wide solution, or even financial help from the state.

"We need to do some serious planning work by the first of the year," Gutzwiller said. "And we need some information. Has this sort of thing happened in other areas of the state? What happens to small towns that get bypassed by the interstate? How do they survive? We have no experience in this. Is an advertising campaign appropriate? We don't know."

Gutzwiller is also working to form a non-profit group, tentatively dubbed "Friends of Big Basin," to serve as a citizen's watchdog agency and keep a close eye on the park. Sewage treatment isn't Big Basin's only ongoing problem, he said.