

Local news

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Trail uses debated at Gray Whale Ranch hearing

Gray Whale Ranch
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SANTA CRUZ — The trails at Gray Whale Ranch aren't big enough to accommodate three different groups of users — hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians, several local residents said Friday.

But for others, the latest addition to the state parks system looks large enough for everyone to enjoy.

The different sides pitched their cases Friday at a public hearing on an interim-use plan for the 2,300-acre ranch that sits between Wilder Ranch State Park and UC Santa Cruz. About 50 people attended.

The hearing was a necessary step in the

plan's path to the California Coastal Commission, which is expected to review the proposal in November.

"We would urge you to consider limits," said Celia Scott of Save the Gray Whale Parklands, a group that has worked to protect the prized land since 1988.

A Santa Cruz city councilwoman, she said she hoped that issues at nearby Wilder Ranch do not surface at Gray Whale.

"I've heard stories that hikers do not feel comfortable," she said, noting that there is about a 5-1 ratio of mountain bikers to hikers at Wilder.

Several speakers called for separate trails to avoid conflicts between bicyclists

and hikers. Other creative solutions included one by Santa Cruz attorney Deborah Malkin to have the different groups compromise by having the park on odd and even days. A 15 mph limit on horseback riders, mountain bikers and all vehicles has also been proposed.

"We'd certainly go along with the 15 mph limit for hikers," joked Peter Scott of the local Sierra Club.

Horsemen and mountain bikers stressed that there is room enough for everyone at Gray Whale Ranch.

And that is what state parks officials hope for in their proposal to open eight miles of existing trails for multiple use. No new roads are proposed, and no trails will

be opened above Smith Grade Road, under the interim plan.

Parks officials are also proposing to build a gravel parking lot for about 45 cars.

This interim plan seeks to open the land to the public. The state took ownership of Gray Whale several months ago after Save-the-Redwoods League bought the property last year with the intent of turning it over to state parks.

"At Wilder, we have multi-use, and it is working out there," said Keith Kelsen of Mountain Bikers of Santa Cruz.

A number of mountain bikers work to maintain trails, and they raised \$31,000 toward the purchase of Gray Whale, he said.

"We're not just a bunch of yahoos riding around," Kelsen said.

Many mountain bikers share the ideals of conservation, he said.

The Santa Cruz County Horsemen's Association is also supporting multi-use trails at the park.

Other speakers urged park officials to consider the unique habitat of Gray Whale before opening it to the public.

The threatened California red-legged frog and the endangered Santa Cruz cy-press are among the special species found on the land.

The public comments will be reviewed by parks officials before they file an application with the Coastal Commission.