

Lode counties dread influx of

tourists to Melones

Economic benefits could be small

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By BOB WHITE

Assistant to the metro editor

ANGELS CAMP—When, and if, New Melones Reservoir is filled and its first phase of recreation facilities completed, some 850,000 boating and camping enthusiasts are expected to flock to the lake annually.

The daily tally of visitors should add up to 3 million annually by the time all \$38 million worth of planned campgrounds and other amenities are in, according to an environmental impact report prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which built New Melones Dam.

Tuolumne and Calaveras counties, which share the new lake's shoreline, both are recreation oriented, with tourism playing a large part in their economy.

So it would seem the anticipated influx of new visitors would have Tuolumne and Calaveras residents rubbing their palms together in gleeful anticipation.

Well, that isn't exactly the case. Some of the folks up here see Melones more as a millstone around the counties' necks than as a benefit.

They envision mile after mile of bumper-to-bumper traffic clogging their narrow two-lane roads, roads that aren't designed to handle the volume of cars, camper rigs and motorhomes that will bring those 3 million visitors.

For another thing, while the lake will hold about 2.4 million acre feet of water, some of which the counties are entitled to, it's doubtful they'll ever get any of it. To get the water to urbanized areas in the counties it would have to be pumped uphill, and that probably wouldn't be economically feasible.

As for economic benefits from the increase in visitors to the counties, many up here expect they will be negligible. John Mills, Tuolumne County associate planner, anticipates most of the visitors to the lake will buy their provisions at home in the valley or bay area, and thus will spend little money locally.

"They may buy gas for their car or boat here, and maybe a six-pack of beer, but most of what they need they'll probably bring with them," Mills said.

David Brennan, assistant director of the Central Sierra Economic Development District, believes some economic benefits can be derived from the lake by identifying the needs of the visitors and then gearing retail firms to meet those needs.

"A common misconception among those who don't live here is that prices of goods such as groceries are higher in this area, so they tend to stock up at home," Brennan said. "We need to let them know that prices here are comparable."

Brennan said the economic development district will begin a study soon to determine what business opportunities might be warranted as a result of the lake.

He pointed out, though, that tentative plans developed by the Corps of Engineers call for the lake's recreation facilities to be "self-contained," possibly with on-site stores and other retail establishments to fill the campers' needs.

"If that's the case, then there probably would be very little economic benefit to local merchants," Brennan said.

Floyd Harris, manager of the Calaveras County Cham-

ber of Commerce, agrees. And Harris feels that any economic benefit derived from the new visitors is going to be more than offset by the traffic congestion they will create.

He pointed out that, because of the locations of the lake's planned recreation facilities, most visitors will be required to drive through either Sonora or Angels Camp.

The volume of traffic carried by Sonora's main street already is at capacity, and Angels Camp's main street is too narrow to carry the anticipated volume of vehicles, Harris said.

But, so far, no federal agency has seemed willing to tackle the anticipated traffic problem, nor has the state, so the two counties may have to deal with it as best they can.

Former Rep. John J. McFall of Manteca persuaded Congress to set aside funds to pay 70 percent of the cost of realigning Parrotts Ferry Road from the reservoir to Vallecito, but that is the only significant federal road expenditure outside the project boundary. The 30 percent Calaveras County must contribute to the Parrots Ferry realignment will amount to \$1 million and will deplete the county's road budget for some years to come, according to Calaveras officials.

Tuolumne County has hired a consulting firm to study the reservoir's impact on the Tuolumne road system. When the study is finished, county officials will seek federal assistance in upgrading roads to handle the anticipated traffic, according to Billy Marr, chairman of the Board of Supervisors. But he isn't optimistic about how much assistance the county can expect.

He anticipates the feds' response will be: "Look at the economic benefits you're getting from the new reservoir. Look at all that sales tax revenue you're getting from that new hotdog stand that went in because of the reservoir."

The county officials also point out that the influx of new visitors will require the counties to bolster their law enforcement and fire protection agencies, not to mention finding some place to dispose of the trash the reservoir visitors will leave behind them.

Tuolumne Sheriff Wally Berry said that while his county's population is only 33,600, it already has a daily equivalency of 94,000 people because of tourism. When the Melones campgrounds open, the number of people in the county on any given day will increase by some 3,900 and there will be 1,300 additional vehicles, he said.

With a staff of 18 patrol deputies and five investigators, Berry said his department would find it difficult to handle its present workload without reserve deputies. In anticipation of the Melones visitors and the tourists expected to be drawn by the new West Side & Cherry Valley Railway park at Tuolumne City, Berry is requesting six more deputies in next year's budget.

Marr, as a Tuolumne supervisor, is resigned to the fact that Melones is going to increase the burden on his county's budget. But he pointed out, "We've got it (New Melones Dam) now and it isn't going to go away, so we're just going to have to live with it."

One benefit provided by Melones, Marr said in a tongue-in-cheek vein, is that "If we ever have to go to Washington, they'll know who we are now," since the Melones controversy extends clear to the halls of Congress.