

Access keeps Sutter Buttes park access locked up

By Griffin Rogers/A-D Reporter

Almost a decade after the California Department of Parks and Recreation purchased a \$2.9 million piece of the Sutter Buttes, Yuba-Sutter residents are no closer to enjoying one of California's most desirable properties located in their own backyard. In 2004, the state purchased a 1,785-acre parcel at Peace Valley, a relatively flat piece of land near North Butte. The idea was to open the property to the public as a new park. The problem? The public can't get there. "Until we have access to a county road with some property, we really don't have (public) access," State Parks spokesman Roy Stearns said. "We have limited access to the park through a road that we have through a right of easement, and we work to be good neighbors to not abuse that right."

The park in the Sutter Buttes is surrounded by several farmers who share the few privately owned roads that access the grounds. It's also home to hundreds of feral pigs, an invasive and non-native species destroying the land's rich historical environment. Rock walls built by the Welsh in the early 20th century are scattered across the landscape, and other old landmarks — such as a flat boulder Indians may have considered to be a portal to the afterlife — share a connection with the Native Americans who left the Buttes in the mid-1800s. The "Smallest Mountain Range in the World" — as it's often referred to — was formed from an ancient volcano and is about 10 miles across with a circular shape. Its highest peak, South Butte, reaches 2,117 feet.

"It's a beautiful mix of mountain landscape, meadows and tree areas," Stearns said. Feral pigs spark battle over fence The California Department of Parks and Recreation is planning to build a \$70,000 fence around its Peace Valley property in order to keep feral pigs from destroying the park's land. From 2004-12, an estimated \$874,000 has been spent to maintain the park property, according to an email from State Parks representative Michael Fehling. Of that, about \$130,000 has been spent on pig management through Proposition 84 funds.

Earlier this year, project manager Jim Dempsey said it's likely the pigs were introduced to the area in the 1980s by a farmer who kept domestic pigs. Since then, the pig population has grown significantly. So much so, in fact, that the state started trapping the elusive animals in 2006 in an attempt to stabilize the population. In the first year, about 40 pigs were trapped and removed. The state trapped more each year, with a total of 180 pigs caught in 2012. Sutter County Supervisor Stan Cleveland said he has been watching the situation closely for about a year, and the pig problem seems to be expanding outside of the Sutter Buttes.

"There's just not as many people hunting the pigs," he said, "and they multiply quickly." People have been buying fewer permits to hunt pigs because the Department of Fish and Wildlife increased the price of the tags, he said. Cleveland is in favor of removing the pigs from the Sutter Buttes. However, he said installing a 1,79-acre exclusion fence is the wrong thing to do because it pushes the problem on the surrounding landowners. "It's the state's right to exempt themselves from

the problem by turning a blind eye," Cleveland said. "Conceptually, it's wrong."

Parks and Recreation spokesman Roy Stearns said the department is willing to work with Sutter Buttes landowners to hear alternatives. However, State Parks is limited to protecting its own property. "We can't take action on private property," he said. Public access remains a hot topic. Landowners surrounding the state park in the Sutter Buttes have been at war with the California Department of Parks and Recreation ever since the agency tried to find public access onto its property. The state uses a private road shared by about four other farmers on the north side of the Sutter Buttes. Officials tried acquiring land from the Shaeffers, landowners to the west of the state's access road, but were unsuccessful.

The methods in which the state has attempted to obtain public access into its park has made some of the Buttes' property owners concerned and upset. "To buy it in the first place without public access is ignorant," said Buttes landowner Arlyn Smith. "I'm tired of the government wasting money on projects like this that they don't think through completely and investigate." A lawsuit filed against California — the entity representing Parks and Recreation — has been in the appeal process since February 2012. The plaintiff named on the appeal is Richard Campbell, a Buttes landowner who shares the state's private access into the Peace Valley park. Meanwhile, Sutter County residents like Frank Coats are frustrated because the park remains closed and the landowners are unwilling to open the roads.

Coats, an investor in a chunk of Sutter Buttes land, said a public park could attract Californians to the Sutter County area and help boost the economy. "The idea that nobody is going to defend the right to enjoy the spectacular state parks just makes me want to throw up," Coats said. Tyrone Shaeffer said he, like many Sutter Buttes landowners, keeps his road private because of liability issues that come from operating a business. "When you're farming," he said, "you never know when you need to spray. And there's always the liability that someone could come into contact with the spray and there could be a problem." Privacy is also a concern, Shaeffer said.

"Would you want your home, your yard, opened up to people just walking through at will?" Shaeffer said. "No, you wouldn't. It's your property, your private domain."

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