

# Stockton Record

## Belly up to Middle Bar

### Long-awaited boat takeout opens on Mokelumne

*By Francis P. Garland*

*Record Staff Writer*

*Published in the Stockton Record, Saturday, May 17, 2003*

JACKSON -- Joe Carroll aimed his kayak right, paddled the final few strokes to the banks of the Mokelumne River's Middle Bar area and rejoiced Friday morning.

"Cool, man," the 50-year-old El Dorado resident said while climbing out of his vessel.

"That's so ... rad."



Carroll was impressed by a new river-access turnout that officially opened Friday, about three miles downstream of Highway 49. Its debut marked the apparent end of fight between recreation enthusiasts and the East Bay Municipal Utility District, operator of two reservoirs on the river.

Lacking a place to disembark, the pristine stretch of the river had been off-limits to boaters and others throughout the utility's 80-year history.

The new facilities include a parking lot for about two dozen cars, restrooms and a trail to the river, all on the Amador County side of the river, upstream from the Mokelumne River Bridge. Most of the project's \$180,000 costs were covered by a state Department of Boating and Waterways grant.

For years, kayakers, hikers and anglers have called upon East Bay MUD to open up the Middle Bar to the public because of its scenic beauty and easy access from the Valley and foothills.

The utility resisted, saying that open access could compromise water quality. Middle Bar is upstream from Pardee Reservoir, which supplies drinking water to about 1.3 million customers. The state prohibits bodily contact with drinking water reservoirs.

Some ignored the ban. They would boat the stretch of water anyway and depart below the Middle Bar Bridge, where they would climb under a barbed-wire fence. East Bay MUD rangers cited some of those boaters for trespassing, an infraction that carried a \$50 penalty for a first offense.

The issue came to a head in early 2000 when district attorneys in Amador and Calaveras counties chose not to prosecute kayakers cited for trespassing.

The access issue attracted the attention of recreation and environmental groups along with state and local officials, which prompted East Bay MUD to reconsider its stance and build the river-access takeout.

On Friday, a number of those involved in the access fight for several years gathered for an official dedication ceremony that Carroll and several other kayakers wound up joining in mid-stream.

"People have been fighting for this for a long time," said Carroll. "This gives us a lot more freedom to enjoy a God-given resource."

Pete Bell, of the Foothill Conservancy, reacted similarly.

"It's about time," said Bell. "The river belongs to the people and the people should have the right to use it. They've been denied that right for years and (East Bay MUD) finally recognized it. And that's great."

Lisa Trankley, a deputy attorney general working on the access issue, was impressed with the new facilities.

"We weren't sure what they were going to look like," she said. "They've done a nice job."

One boater who hasn't yet seen the completed facilities but plans to make the most of them is Groveland resident Andrew McKinsey, whose trespassing case in 2000 was not prosecuted by then-Calaveras County District Attorney Peter Smith.

"The easier they make it on people, the better it is," McKinsey said. "Personally, I was happy crawling under a fence, but since some people were motivated enough to pursue this issue and get good facilities, that's great."

The new stretch figures to attract attention in part because it virtually doubles the already popular Electra Run, which starts above the Highway 49 bridge. In addition, the portion from Highway 49 to Middle Bar is considered a quality training area for beginners.

"There's not very many of those left," said Mike Ammon of the Department of Boating and Waterways.

Although shoreline fishing is not allowed in the new access area, anglers can continue to try their luck from the nearby bridge.

Jim Lawton, of Lone, who was having trouble landing anything Friday, said he doesn't believe anglers will mind sharing the area with kayakers as long as they use the new takeout spot upriver from the bridge.

"If they come through here," he said, "they'll catch everyone's lines and that could cause big problems."

Although signs warn that the area closes at sunset, some local officials are concerned the area might become a late-night party spot, given its out-of-the-way setting.

Amador County Supervisor Rich Escamilla said he's hoping the public will "police itself" and keep things under control.

Rob Alcott, East Bay MUD's water-supply manager, said he expects local law enforcement will keep an eye out to see whether there's any change in use and whether any problems result from the newly opened area.

"That was one of the concerns that the local jurisdictions identified," said Alcott. "But in the end, it was decided that you couldn't stop a project viewed as so positive because of (potential) behavior problems."

*\* To reach Lode Bureau Chief Francis P. Garland, phone 736-9554 or e-mail [garland@goldrush.com](mailto:garland@goldrush.com)*