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# State parks proposal would build Delta recreation facilities

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The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, that giant maze of waterways at the heart of the Central Valley, is a house divided when it comes to recreation.

Boaters can explore a 1,100-mile tangle of sloughs and canals. It's a different story for landlubbers. At 740,000 acres, the Delta is nearly as large as Rhode Island. Yet it holds few public parks.

Access to levees, which are mostly privately owned, has been gradually banned across much of the estuary after some ill-behaved visitors spoiled the fun by dumping trash, disturbing vegetation and lighting bonfires.

Today, well-mannered anglers and bird-watchers are greeted by a profusion of "no trespassing" signs.

"It is a big controversy," said Amber Gomes, an employee of Hap's Bait & Tackle in Rio Vista and a lifelong Delta resident. "We've got a lot of people coming into town that are not treating our levees fairly. They bring in couches, they bring in chairs, they rearrange rocks. They leave our levees trashed."

In a new report, the state Department of Parks and Recreation proposes to ease the strain by building recreation facilities that would offer lots of ways to get near the water.

Mandated by 2009 water reform legislation, the report says visitor spending in the Delta generates \$784 million annually and supports 15,000 jobs. There is potential for much more if only there were more trails, campsites and waterfront access.

"If we think about what Californians like to do – camping, bike riding, sport fishing, bird-watching – the Delta is great for that," said Dan Ray, chief of planning at State Parks.

Right now, though, there isn't much in the way of facilities for those activities. Sacramento County offers a few tiny shoreline parks for bank fishing, wading and picnics. They are little more than gravel turnouts with trash cans.

Only one state park – Brannan Island State Recreation Area – provides a full range of amenities such as campsites, trails, interpretive programs and a boat ramp.

Others, like Delta Meadows State Recreation Area, offer more potential than pleasure. The park near Locke leads to some of the Delta's most beautiful waterways. Yet it has no facilities beyond a blue plastic outhouse, overflowing trash cans and a crumbling and treacherous boat ramp.

"We have county parks and certain facilities that haven't been fully developed, and really aren't maintained," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, director of Restore the Delta, a local advocacy group. Before the state or county acquires additional public land, she said, "We need to first enhance parks that are already in the Delta."

Ray agreed, noting that the report recommends making better use of all public land in the Delta – of which there is an ample supply.

Twitchell and Sherman islands in Sacramento County, for instance, are owned by the state Department of Water Resources. Totaling more than 13,000 acres, they offer lots of opportunity for nature trails, campgrounds, fishing piers and other amenities.

But for decades the islands have been leased to farmers, and offer no recreation facilities.

Barrigan-Parrilla supports public use of the islands, saying it would go a long way toward alleviating the strain on farmers, who own most of the Delta's private land and are largely responsible for levee upkeep via special maintenance districts.

"Farmers can't take the liability. They've had too much damage done on their property," she said.

The report also proposes making more use of Delta waterways. One idea is to anchor floating campsites on scenic sloughs for overnight visits by boaters and canoeists.

DWR and State Parks have already partnered to provide such campsites at Lake Oroville, and Ray said they are in huge demand.

The report is frank in stating there is no money for these projects, nor is there hope of a windfall soon. An \$11 billion water and habitat restoration bond, expected on the 2012 ballot, includes hundreds of millions of dollars for Delta projects – but none for parks.

"I don't think these are ideas for today or tomorrow," Ray said. "We're trying to look down the road and anticipate needs 10 to 20 years from now."

Barrigan-Parrilla said money should come from the big water agencies that take water from the Delta. They "should help enhance recreation for the Delta community. When you think in terms of state parks, it's truly enhancing a state function in return for using a state asset."

Public comments on the report may be submitted until May 31. It will then be used by the Delta Stewardship Council to create a larger plan for the region's future, due by January 2012.

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