

# News

## NEW MELONES LAKE SURPRISES USERS WITH FEES

By **Dana M. Nichols**

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ANGELS CAMP - New Melones Lake's reign as California's largest reservoir with free boat launching came to a quiet end Wednesday.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation rangers staffed the lake's entrance kiosks starting at 9 a.m. and for the first time began collecting an entry fee of \$6 per car or \$8 for vehicles towing boats. But they also showed mercy to people like Angels Camp resident Bill Ulrey, 60, who was caught by surprise.

"I didn't bring any cash," said Ulrey, who planned to hike at the lake.

Ranger Brian Scott Older gave Ulrey a one-time pass, but he also explained that henceforth, visitors are going to be charged in order to raise money for improvements and repairs to trails, campgrounds, picnic areas and launch ramps at the lake. "Your money is being reinvested in the facility," Older said.

New Melones Lake is the fifth-largest reservoir in California, after Shasta, Oroville, Trinity and San Luis. All of those larger lakes have long charged boat launching fees ranging from \$5 to \$12. Day visits and boat launching at New Melones, in contrast, have been free since the lake filled and became a boating hot spot in the early 1980s.

Some of those who paid the new \$8 fee to launch boats Wednesday mourned its arrival.

"It was one of the only lakes in California where you didn't have to pay to launch, which was OK," said John Brownell, 53, of Santa Clara. Still, Brownell said he recognized that such fees are happening because cash-strapped federal agencies can't find any other way to pay for recreation facilities.

"I don't mind the fees. I think for the first time initiating them, they are a little high," he said. Brownell said it generally costs only \$6 to launch his boat in Santa Clara County.

The new fees were made possible by the 2005 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act. The act allows agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Forest Service and others to charge use fees at facilities, then use the money raised to repair or upgrade those same facilities. The guarantee the money will stay local was a big selling point for some lake visitors.

"It's great it will stay in the area," said Janet Dempsey, 43, of Sonora, who came to the lake to do some water-skiing with her father, Steve Klesitz, 82.

New Melones Lake has had about 550,000 visitors so far this year, which is fewer than usual, possibly because water levels have been low, said Peggi Brooks, resource manager at the lake.

New Melones officials have a long list of repairs, upgrades and potential additions at the lake, but they haven't yet determined a final plan because they don't know exactly how much revenue the fees will bring in, Brooks said.

Proposals high on the list include increased law enforcement patrols, more ranger-led programs and hikes, interpretive signs, and the creation of a recreational trail system at the Tuttle town Recreation Area.

Work on some of those trails will begin in November during a volunteer workday, Brooks said.

The new funding also will pay for work to make more of the lake's trails, campsites, picnic areas and bathrooms accessible to disabled people, Brooks said.

The entry booths will be staffed for now only during some peak hours and on weekends. Visitors at other times can use self-help kiosks and deposit boxes near the lake's boat launches to pay their fees, Brooks said. Within a few months, lake managers will install automated stations similar to ATMs at the lake entrances so people can pay with debit and credit cards.

Both lake visitors and staff say most people are likely to keep visiting the lake despite the fees. Older, at the Glory Hole entrance, said by late morning Wednesday, only two people had decided to turn back after learning that it now cost money to visit the lake.

Brownell, once his boat was afloat at the Tuttle town launch ramp, had clearly gotten over his initial irritation at being charged.

"It is so beautiful out here," Brownell said.

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## New Melones fees

Day use fee: \$6 per car; free for seniors 62 and older

Day use with boat launching: \$8; \$4 for seniors 62 and older

12-month pass: \$60; \$30 for seniors 62 and older

Information: [www.usbr.gov/mp/cao/field\\_offices/new\\_melones/index.html](http://www.usbr.gov/mp/cao/field_offices/new_melones/index.html) or (209) 536-9543