OREGON'S GRAND CANYON PLAN

A big new state park, due in 2013, will be wild land like no other

By TERRY RICHARD

What will become Oregon's second-largest state park is being planned for the John Day River, where the state's longest protected waterway cleaves a deep canyon between the windfall-studded wheat lands of Sherman and Gilliam counties.

More than any other park in the state system, Cottonwood Canyon, set to open in 2013, will be wild land — a place for city folk to hear coyotes howl, to see a night sky filled with stars and to feel desert winds in their hair.

The new park is part of the legacy of Gov. Ted Kulongoski, who leaves office next year. In 2004, he directed the Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission to open one new state park each year, the first major expansion in three decades. The additions are funded by lottery money, which also helps with the parks' maintenance.

Cottonwood Canyon will be the 10th in the program, which began with L.L. "Stub" Stewart State Park just west of Portland.

At an eventual size of 8,000 acres owned by the state, Cottonwood Canyon will be nearly the size of Silver Falls State Park, the largest in the state system. But an additional 8,000 acres of federal Bureau of Land Management land will be associated with Cottonwood Canyon, giving it a far larger feel.

The Cottonwood park, a 130-mile drive from Portland, will encompass 16 miles of John Day River bottom at the lone highway crossing of the river for 110 miles. The only current improvement at the site is the BLM's boating takeout, with restroom and picnic tables. Day-one hiking and biking also are allowed on a gravel road downstream for five miles.

Just how the park will look depends on the planning process, but it will remain largely primitive, with phased Please see COTTONWOOD Page C3
Cottonwood:
State buys the land in installments

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Development continues for many years. Possible development includes low-impact campsites along the 16 river miles for boaters, hikers and bikers, new trails, and car camping sites and rustic cabins near the highway access.

Once a cattle ranch

The land that will become the park reveals itself slowly when you drive down the steep, twisty grade from the wheat town of Washo on the Sherman County side, 25 miles southeast of Biggs and the Columbia River Gorge. Vertical basalt cliffs alternate on the canyon walls with steep sloping hillsides, painted green by spring's new growth. That lasts only a few weeks, before the intense sun converts the hills to tawny brown.

Down at 550 feet, where Oregon 206 crosses the river, sagebrush mixes with grasslands and wildflowers.

The John Day River is a state and federally protected water.

Way and the 115 miles between Service Creek and Cottonwood creek, which has low rapids, is a popular spring float for rafters and other boaters.

The fast, chocolate-colored water clears and slows to a trickle by summer.

The land that is to become Cottonwood Canyon State Park had been in the Murtha family of Condon and Portland since the 1930s as a working cattle ranch. With three siblings in their 80s, the family was looking for a buyer a few years ago and found Western Rivers Conservancy of Portland.

Because it can move more quickly than government agencies when private land comes on the market, the conservancy bought 8,000 acres for $7.86 million with the intent of selling it to the state Parks and Recreation Department at the same price.

The state bought the first of three installations, 2,400 acres, last year. The agency's top land acquisition priority in the next two budget cycles is to acquire the remaining acreage. Western Rivers has given the state authority to plan as if it owns the land now.

James E. Murtha, 64, retired and living in Helena, Mont., remembers spending summers on the ranch that was owned by his grandfather and his father, both also Jim Murthas.

"We worked hard all day, handling 100-pound alfalfa bales," he said. "When the day was over, we headed for the swimming hole in the river, where we had a diving board built from some two-by- sixes. We got buck naked and jumped in that river. It was so private, and the water felt so good."

Though the state may adopt a different swimming policy, the agency is willing to listen to what people want through public hearings, which started in late April.

Local concerns

The first round of public hearings on Cottonwood Canyon turned up a number of concerns from local residents, especially ranchers who own adjoining land.

They worry about wildfire, trespass, emergency services, lost property tax revenue to the county, grazing, hunting, steelhead runs, condemnation of property, protection of tribal sites, and invasive weeds. State parks staff heard them out and indicated a willingness to address each in the planning process.

Mike Weedman, who farms on the flats above the river, knows that a park will bring some inconveniences but said it will be a "nice little park" that he's not upset about.

"When you get a flood of people, they will cut fences, dig up archaeological sites and leave garbage. That's a given," he said.

The public will have another opportunity to comment in August, then again in November when a general plan is released. A master plan will be submitted for approval to the state Parks Commission next summer, before both counties are asked to approve the plan.

Marvin Layne, owner of the Cowboy Up Cafe in Condon, is in favor of the park because of the tourists it will draw.

"Tourism helps keep this county alive," he said. "Motorcycle groups in summer and hunters in October are my major sources of revenue."

Local residents who benefit from tourism hope the park will draw first-time visitors to the area, then tempt them to travel beyond into Oregon's lightly populated open space.