Half Dome Trail Stewardship Plan: Alternatives Considered and Dismissed

Half Dome is an iconic, granite dome rising 5,000 feet above the Valley floor in one dramatic sweep of sheer rock. Since its first ascent in 1875, the climb to Half Dome's peak has become a major draw for park visitors. Studies conducted in 2008 observed that Saturday and holiday use averaged more than 800 hikers per day with peak numbers from 1100–1200 hikers.

The National Park Service (NPS) considered several possible alternatives in developing the plan. The plan has five alternatives. Some of the more commonly suggested alternatives, which were considered but dismissed, are listed below. (A full list of alternatives that were considered and dismissed is available on page 2-13 of the Half Dome Trail Stewardship Plan.)

Install a Third Cable to the Cable System

With this alternative, the NPS would install a third cable, additional stanchions, steps, anchor bolts, and hardware next to the existing cable system, resulting in a total of three cables and two lanes of travel, one up and one down the cable system. In the absence of use limits, this additional cable could increase the cable system's capacity to handle the same level of use with less congestion or existing levels of use with less congestion.

This alternative was considered and dismissed because it is not consistent with the purpose and need for the project. A third cable that would potentially accommodate existing use levels does not meet the goal of reducing crowding and encounter rates on the Half Dome trail in order to protect wilderness character and increase safety. A third cable would allow the continued, extremely high use of the Trail resulting in crowding on the Trail and summit with encounter rates that are unacceptable. Moreover, a three-cable system would likely not resolve safety issues associated with unregulated use levels. At 1200 people per day, people at one time (PAOT)on the cables can reach 130, which could overwhelm even the additional lane of travel, causing delays and congestion.

This alternative would also result in new human development in wilderness, which is inconsistent with approved plans. The Yosemite Wilderness Management Plan specifically limits facilities in Yosemite wilderness to those present in 1989 when the plan was written, and to those that were specifically proposed in the plan. The plan states, "Further facilities would compromise the National Park Service's responsibilities in wilderness management." A third cable would be inconsistent with the park's approved Wilderness Management Plan.

Station Rangers at the Half Dome Cables in Lieu of Use Limits

Under this alternative, a ranger would be stationed at the base of the cables to regulate traffic during periods of congestion and/or to close the route during inclement weather. This could eliminate the need for use limits.

This alternative was considered and dismissed because it would not decrease crowding and provide for solitude opportunities. Encounter rates would continue to be high, and crowding would be transferred to the summit and Sub Dome.

Similarly, positioning a ranger to "close" the cable system when a storm is approaching contradicts established policy for risk management in wilderness. NPS Management Policies 2006 6.4.1 states, "Park visitors need to accept wilderness on its own unique terms," and the NPS should only provide visitors with "general information" concerning possible risks. This would establish an unmanageable precedent for other Wilderness areas. In addition, there are hundreds of people at risk from thunderstorms in other locations in Yosemite such as Sentinel Dome, the top of Yosemite Falls, Mt. Hoffmann, and Mt. Dana. If Half Dome is routinely closed when weather threatens, there would be an expectation that other areas would be held to the same standard.

Management Policies 8.2.5.1 states that, "Park visitors must assume a substantial degree of risk and responsibility for their own safety…" This option takes responsibility away from the hiker and places it with a NPS ranger. The ranger would have to make decisions based on a complex set of ever-changing variables, including the potential for bad weather, individual hikers' abilities and confidence to handle wet rock, and estimated crowding on the cables during any period of potentially bad weather. If a ranger is contacting hikers at the base of Sub Dome, that ranger would have to determine what the weather will be for the next two to three hours, the average time that it takes hikers to ascend and descend the cables. If there is storm activity or even cloud formation over the Sierra Crest, there is potential for a storm to move over the Half Dome area in that two to three hour period. This can be a daily occurrence from June to August and would result in numerous unnecessary closures.

Control Timing of Use

Under this alternative, the NPS would spread use out over the day by assigning hikers to specific time slots. Controlling the timing of use would eliminate midday crowding and maintain free-flowing conditions. A ranger would be stationed at the base of the cables and would serve as a gatekeeper allowing hikers to use the cable system only during their assigned time slot.

This alternative was considered and dismissed because it does not meet the purpose of increasing safety along the trail corridor. A late ascent time could pose safety risks for many hikers. Most people plan their hike to Half Dome to take advantage of all daylight hours. Forcing some users to wait to ascend until the late afternoon would result in an increase in the number of hikers. Potential consequences of having to wait for a later ascent time could make their day even longer. There have been numerous search and rescue incidents caused by completing the return portion of their trip after dark. In addition, delaying people until later in the day means they are at the summit in the afternoon when thunderstorms are more likely.

Issue Permits That Are Good for Multiple Days

Under this alternative, the park would retain the cable system and implement a permit system with permits that are good for multiple days. Permit holders would be able to take advantage of favorable weather conditions or other risk management factors and choose the day of their ascent within a given time period.

This action was considered and dismissed because it would not guarantee elimination of crowding, opportunities for solitude, or free-flowing conditions. There is no way of predicting the number of people who would be using the Half Dome Trail on any given day, and it is likely that encounter rates would exceed 16 groups per hour on weekends and on the first day of favorable weather after a period of inclement weather.

How can I get involved?

- Visit online: www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/planning.htm
- Attend Public Open Houses on the last Wednesday of each month from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Visitor Center Auditorium in Yosemite Valley. Park entrance fees are waived for visitors who attend the Public Open Houses.
- Submit your email address to receive the park's periodic electronic newsletter yose_planning@nps.gov
- Provide input during the planning process. You can submit comments by visiting the National Park Service's Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) project page at http://parkplanning.nps.gov /halfdome Or send regular mail to:
- Mail: Superintendent Attn: Half Dome EA P.O. Box 577 Yosemite, CA 95389
  Fax: 209/379-1294
- Phone: 209/379-1369