

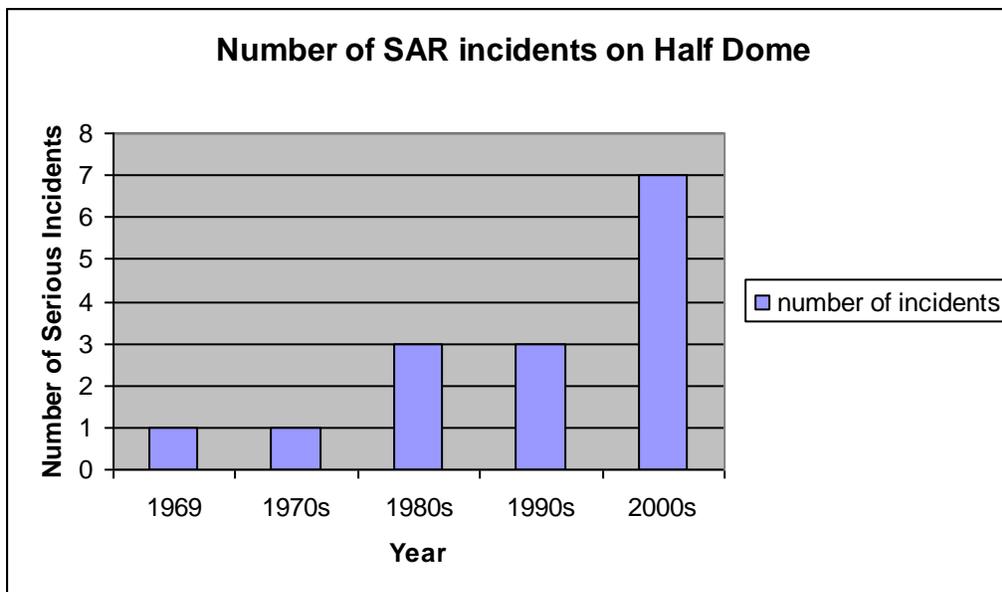
MANAGEMENT OF THE HALF DOME CABLES

The superintendent of Yosemite National Park will exercise the discretionary authority delegated to him under 36 C.F.R. Section 1.5 to adopt emergency regulatory provisions in the park's compendium that will restrict the number of people using the cables to 400 per day. This restriction is needed to provide for visitor safety. This change is based on data demonstrating that use of the Half Dome cables has increased dramatically in the last few years and that such an increase has resulted in a dangerous level of crowding on the summit and on the cables themselves.

Although the park plans to initiate a draft rule for notice in the *Federal Register* and an environmental assessment to comprehensively address management of Half Dome, neither of these processes will be concluded in time to protect visitors during the 2010 and 2011 seasons. In the absence of such a final rule, unrestricted use would continue on Half Dome, with a continuation of the dangerous conditions there. Therefore, an emergency exists necessitating the adoption of this restriction until the *Federal Register* rulemaking process can conclude.

EXISTING CONDITIONS:

Abnormally high use of the Half Dome cables on Saturdays and holidays causes crowded conditions on the cables and long lines of hikers waiting to go up and down the cables. A 2008 study showed that an average of about 800 people per day used the cables on Saturdays and holidays, with peak use reaching more than 1,000. As use has increased in recent years, so have the number of accidents, rescues, and fatalities. Although the exact safe level of use has not yet been determined, current data suggest that once use increases beyond a certain point, accidents become more common.



Weather also appears to be a significant factor in safety conditions on Half Dome. Data show that wet rock is nearly always a factor in accidents on the cables. In June 2009, on two consecutive Saturdays, serious accidents coincided with rain storms. The first incident involved a hiker who was seriously injured after slipping on wet rock and falling. The following Saturday, a hiker slipped on wet rock and fell to his death. After this fatality, the remaining 40 hikers still on the cables had to be rescued because

they were unable to descend the slippery rock on their own. Half Dome and the Subdome are high, exposed rocky points that are inherently unsafe during lightning storms. A lightning strike resulted in the deaths of two hikers on top of Half Dome in 1985.

SAFETY CONCERNS:

Crowded conditions delay hikers on both the ascent and descent. Crowded conditions mean that many hikers on the cables have to stand on the steep granite slope without being able to use the wooden planks. Standing on the rock forces the hikers to hold more of their body weight with their hands and arms, causing a great deal of fatigue. When the cables are crowded and the rock is wet, the inability to use the steps can cause some people to slip and completely lose their footing. Most seriously, increased travel time may affect the ability of large crowds to exit the summit quickly as bad weather approaches. Hikers unable to descend quickly may find themselves exposed to rain, high winds, and lightning with no place to take shelter.

The safest conditions occur when people are able to move relatively freely up and down the cables (that is, when conditions are free flowing). These free-flowing conditions allow hikers to get up and down the cables more quickly, making it more likely they can avoid afternoon storms and avoid unnecessary, additional fatigue. Under crowded conditions, hikers who make the decision to descend from the summit because of an approaching storm may find themselves considerably delayed by crowding on the cables.

PLANNED ACTIONS:

Yosemite will implement a concurrent two-part process for the summers of 2010 and 2011 to address visitor safety on Half Dome:

- 1. Institute an interim permit system for anyone using the Half Dome cables in order to limit unsafe crowding. This temporary system will be in place until the completion of the management plan and environmental assessment.**
- 2. Begin work on an environmental assessment, with public involvement, to determine a long-term management strategy for Half Dome that addresses not only safety but also visitor experience, preservation of wilderness character, and resource protection.**

Interim Permit System: Emergencies requiring immediate action are exempt from the Council on Environmental Quality's provisions for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA 1506.11; 516 DM, 5.8). Only those actions required to resolve the emergency are exempt. For this reason, this emergency action considered only those factors that relate directly to safety, not to wilderness character or resource protection. This emergency restriction will remain in place only long enough to allow the environmental assessment and federal rulemaking processes to be completed.

Free-flowing conditions on the cable route occur more consistently on weekdays than on Saturdays and holidays. Approximately 390 hikers per day use the cables on weekdays, with Saturday and holiday use at twice that level. In order to allow hikers a better chance to experience free-flowing conditions on the cable route throughout the entire summer, the National Park Service will implement a temporary use limit on the Half Dome trail above the base of the subdome of 400 hikers per day on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and federal holidays while the cables are up (approximately mid-May through mid-October). Of the 400 hikers allowed, 300 of these will be permitted through a new interim permit system and approximately 100 per day will be by overnight wilderness permit holders. These numbers were chosen

to provide the best combination of accessibility and safety, allowing the most hikers per day while still allowing free-flowing travel up and down the cables. This permit system will be handled by the National Recreation Reservation Service (recreation.gov) through an advanced permitting system and will cost \$1.50 per permit. Each person can purchase up to four permits per web session or phone call (90% of Half Dome hiking groups have four or fewer people). No permit is required for travel on the Half Dome trail beyond the base of the subdome on Monday through Thursday (except on federal holidays).

Ascending Half Dome is more than a strenuous hike. Climbing the cables to the summit of Half Dome combines the rigors of a long, arduous hike with some of the rigors normally associated with a technical, roped climb of a peak. Many of the people currently attempting the cable route are hikers and have the misguided impression that Half Dome is simply a "hard hike." Many hikers do not understand the seriousness of the venture, the potential hazards, and the consequences of a decision to attempt the route during threatening weather conditions. The permit process will allow the National Park Service to give a consistent and poignant safety message to potential Half Dome hikers when they receive their permits. Additionally the park will work to increase safe use of the cables by enhancing its current Half Dome web page, produce a new Half Dome safety brochure, and improve Half Dome related safety signage at the Happy Isles and Glacier Point trailheads.

A monitoring system will be instituted during the 2010 season to ensure that safety goals are being met through this restriction. The details of the permit requirement for 2011 may change as monitoring informs the effort. For instance, if use is displaced to the Monday through Thursday hiking period in sufficient numbers to prevent free-flowing conditions on the cables, the permit requirement may be expanded to include those days. Conversely, if monitoring shows that use is below maximum free-flowing conditions, the number of permits could be increased in 2011.

During the interim Half Dome permit program, the Visitor Use and Social Sciences Branch, Resources Management and Science Division will continue its study of visitor use patterns to inform both the fine tuning of the temporary permit program and the environmental assessment.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Compliance and Federal Rule-making:

In accordance with NEPA and NPS Director's Order 12, a public planning process and an associated environmental assessment (to further evaluate the environmental consequences and significance of impact of the possible permanent solutions to this visitor safety problem) will be initiated during the spring of 2010. It is anticipated that public scoping for this planning and environmental compliance process will occur during summer 2010, when the interim program is underway. During this time, the National Park Service will: 1) seek input from the public regarding short- and long-term solutions to the safety problem as well as the concerns about crowding on visitor experience, wilderness character, and resource preservation, 2) collect additional natural, cultural, and social science information, and 3) evaluate potential impacts associated with the possible solutions. The NPS foresees public review of the environmental assessment, including identification of a preferred alternative for permanently addressing safety and wilderness preservation, to be released during summer 2011. Implementation of a permanent program would follow.

Concurrent with completing the above referenced plan and environmental assessment, the National Park Service will initiate an appropriate federal rulemaking process. The NPS will publish all proposed new regulations (proposed rules) in the *Federal Register*, and provide a way for interested parties to comment, offer amendments, or to object to the regulation. New regulations or amendments to existing regulations would also be published on the NPS website and in many newspapers and other

publications. The notices will include information on how to submit comments, or participate in public meetings on the proposed rule. Once complete, the regulation will become a final rule and will be printed in the *Federal Register*, the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), and posted on the NPS website.

PUBLIC NOTICE

The NPS will notify the public through posted signs, brochures, the park newspaper, news releases, the park website, and the National Recreation Reservation Service (recreation.gov). These notices will explain the reason for the permit requirement and the details of the permit system. Additionally, park staff will be at the trailhead that nearly all day hikers use to Hike Half Dome and at the base of the subdome to inform hikers of the closure, and to enforce it (at the subdome).

TIMETABLE:

The first day visitors will be able to purchase Half Dome permits is March 1, 2010. Half Dome permits will be available on March 1 for dates in May and June. On April 1, Half Dome permits will be available for dates in July and August. On May 1, permits will be available for dates in September and October.