



A bridge built of dreams

By M.S. Enkoji - Bee Staff Writer

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For more than a decade, it was a bridge too far.

The ambitious dream of a 100-mile trail rising into the Sierra from the heart of the Central Valley hinged on the trail spanning 140 feet of rugged river gorge.

Mark Holland, who shepherded a monumental volunteer effort lasting 11 years, remembers standing over Big Sandy Creek in Fresno County, gazing at the task ahead.

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"What I saw was a difficult project," said Holland, who would go through four mountain bikes and see his son advance from grade school to college before Big Sandy Bridge was built.

The effort -- by a few mules and volunteers donating the equivalent of 512 workdays -- ended over the weekend when three sections of a steel bridge were clanked into place, linking 18 miles that make up the lower leg of the San Joaquin River Trail.

For those who had endured hard labor in scorching heat and

setbacks in engineering, money and red tape, the finished bridge was a dream come true.

"The champagne flowed," said Steve Hazel, president of the San Joaquin River Trail Council, an organization of a dozen groups that contributed financially and physically to build the trail.

With the Big Sandy Bridge in place, the trail council is blazing ahead on the last 20 miles of the route.

When completed, it will be California's only "trans-Sierra" trail, an east-west route that begins in Millerton Lake State Recreation Area north of Fresno, climbs through the foothills, crests the Sierra, then slopes down to Devils Postpile National Monument near

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Volunteers maneuver sections of a bridge into place at Big Sandy Creek. "The civilians hadn't done anything like this before. Honestly, we hadn't either," said National Guard Lt. Col. Mark Van Dyke, who piloted the helicopter that hauled the bridge sections. California Department of Parks and Recreation

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Mammoth, Hazel said.

Named for the river it follows, the trail for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding will someday be extended downriver in north Fresno, where state Highway 99 crosses the river, Hazel said.

From the place it begins now, the trail follows historic routes used by American Indians and by miners who paid a toll to commute between mining sites.

The trail will connect to the crestline Pacific Crest and John Muir trails, both nationally known routes, said Ruth Coleman, director of the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

The San Joaquin River Trail should draw visitors to an area often overshadowed by the state's coastline and mountains, Coleman said.

"This is the chance for the rest of the state to discover why preserving land in the Central Valley is important," she said.

Holland, 47, of Fresno has been drawn to the area around Big Sandy Creek because of the mountain biking.

A bridge builder by trade, he supervised the Big Sandy Bridge construction, starting with survey and design work in 1996.

To build the base for the bridge -- with a combination of private and public money -- Holland and dozens of other volunteers hauled in more than 40,000 pounds of stones by Jeep and on mules.

In April 2005, the bridge's base was done. A helicopter would be needed to lift in three sections of the bridge.

Holland said it took two years to cut through red tape to get the helicopter -- a Black Hawk from the California National Guard.

California National Guard Lt. Col. Mark Van Dyke piloted the Black Hawk that lowered the bridge spans in place on Saturday and Sunday.

"The civilians hadn't done anything like this before. Honestly, we hadn't either," said Van Dyke, an Iraq war veteran.

Early Saturday, Van Dyke rehearsed lifting and placing one of the bridge sections on flat ground. The three bridge parts -- the largest weighs 5,000 pounds and is 48 feet long -- had to be placed within 10 inches of their permanent location.

With soldiers and volunteers holding guidelines from the ground, the first end section of the bridge was in place within 15 minutes.

"It was like the hardest tug-of-war you can imagine," said Holland, who was on the ground grappling lines that day.

The middle section, the largest, took two tries.

"It looked easier than it was," Van Dyke said.

After some finishing touches, Holland said he watched two volunteers race across the bridge. Then, he borrowed a mountain bike and rode across the bridge -- the first of many times.

About the writer:

- The Bee's M.S. Enkoji can be reached at (916) 321-1106 or menkoji@sacbee.com.

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A helicopter-borne section of



bridge is swung into place over Big Sandy Creek. The bridge will become part of the 100-mile-long San Joaquin River Trail, the only one in the state to cross the Sierra.

California Department of Parks and Recreation

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A California National Guard helicopter lowers a bridge span into place at Big Sandy Creek.

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