

Visitors Bureau optimistic

-- Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau

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Tourists are flocking to the region, if the number of visitors at the Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau is any indication.

"We've seen a substantial increase in the number of visitors this year over last year," said Dan Cuning, chief executive officer of the bureau. "It's another sign that the economy is turning around and (that) people are out traveling once again."

In the second week of June 2009, the bureau had 976 visitors, an average of nearly 200 people per day. The number increased 20%, to 1,207 visitors, in the same week of 2010.

"It's a very positive number," Cuning said. "That, combined with what we're hearing from a lot of the hotels in the area and other industry partners, is painting a very optimistic picture for the summer."

So far this year, the visitors bureau has seen a total increase in visitors of almost 200, even with the center open only six days a week instead of seven for the first half of the year.

The bureau was forced to close on Sunday because of staffing issues and budget cuts. The Madera County Board of Supervisors eliminated bureau funding to help balance the county budget.

The bureau resumed seven-day operations at the end of May, to accommodate additional visitors.

"We've got a great group of volunteers who are truly dedicated to helping visitors learn about the region," Cuning said. "We're very lucky that they help us. We couldn't do it without them."

Tom Wheeler, chairman of the Madera County Board of Supervisors and a supporter of the visitors bureau, said he was excited by the increase.

"I cannot begin to explain how great it is to see the increase in tourists stopping by the visitors center," he said. "Even with our current economic climate, the visitors bureau continues to attract visitors from all over the world. The visitors bureau's board and staff are truly dedicated to promoting Madera County as a total destination. I can't thank them enough for their efforts in bringing much-needed tax dollars into our county."

The visitors bureau is at 41969 Highway 41 in Oakhurst.