



Tuolumne Wild & Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement



The Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River, designated in 1984, includes 83 miles of the river on the western side of the Sierra Nevada in California.

The Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River flows through the heart of Yosemite's High Sierra. Designated in 1984, 83 miles of the river are protected as a Wild and Scenic River, with 54 miles of the Tuolumne in Yosemite National Park. The river's two main forks, the Dana and Lyell forks, begin near the mountains of the same name at the crest of the Sierra Nevada. The forks then converge and the river meanders lazily westward through Tuolumne Meadows before cascading down the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne and exiting the park near Poopenaut Valley (the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is not part of the national wild and scenic rivers system).

Why a Comprehensive Management Plan?

The Wild and Scenic River Act (WSRA) requires comprehensive planning to protect the free-flowing condition, water quality, and the outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) of designated rivers (ORVs are the special attributes that make a river eligible for inclusion). The *Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS)* is the National Park Service's response to this requirement. The *Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS* will be the guiding document for protecting and enhancing the Tuolumne's river values (free-flowing condition, water quality, and the ORVs). The plan will provide

direction for managing use and user capacity with the Tuolumne River corridor for the next 20 years and beyond. It evaluates impacts and threats to river values and identifies strategies for protecting and enhancing these values over the long-term. The plan follows and documents planning processes required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other legal mandates governing National Park Service decision-making. In accordance with these statutes, the *Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS* was developed in consultation with members of the public, traditionally-associated American Indian tribes and groups, and other key stakeholder groups, and strongly reflects this input.

What the Plan Includes

In accordance with WSRA, NEPA, NHPA, and other applicable statutes, the plan:

- Establishes the boundaries and segment classifications (as wild, scenic, or recreational) of the Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River.
- Provides a clear process for protection of the river's free-flowing condition in keeping with WSRA Section 7.
- Refines descriptions of the river's 10 outstandingly remarkable values, documents their condi-

tion, and establishes monitoring programs and actions to protect and enhance them.

- Determines the type and location of facilities (both current and future) necessary to provide for public use and enjoyment of the river.
- Establishes a visitor use capacity program that addresses the kinds and amounts of public use that the river corridor can sustain while protecting and enhancing the river values.
- Evaluates a range of alternatives, assesses the effects of each action alternative on natural and socio-cultural resources, and identifies an “environmentally preferred” alternative.
- Describes consultation and coordination efforts.

Evaluation of Alternatives

As part of the *Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS*, the National Park Service evaluated five alternatives (one “No Action” alternative and four action alternatives). The “No Action” Alternative represents a continuation of current management practices and provides a basis to compare differences among the alternatives. Alternatives 1 through 4 would all protect and enhance river values through meadow and riparian restoration, mitigation of hydrologic impacts, elimination of roadside informal parking to discourage social trailing, and the rehabilitation of the Tuolumne Meadows Campground. The action alternatives allow for different quantities and mixtures of use, reflecting an array of different types of desired visitor experiences that were based on public comment and feedback during the planning process. Alternative 1 would emphasize primitive, unconfined recreation by removing all commercial services, resulting in the lowest levels of visitation. Alternative 2 would respond to those members of the public who expressed a desire for more recreational opportunities, resulting in higher use levels. Alternative 3 would retain the majority of services, but with a slightly lower use level. Alternative 4 (Preferred) would balance the traditional Tuolumne experience with a slight reduction in development to make visitor use more sustainable, while slightly increasing user capacity. A more thorough description of Alternative 4 (Preferred) and how it has changed in response to public comment follows.

Removing roadside parking and replacing it with designated spaces in redesigned parking lots will improve safety, reduce congestion, and improve views of the meadows along Tioga Road.



Alternative 4 (Preferred)

In the Tuolumne Meadows area, Alternative 4 would seek to balance the traditional Tuolumne experience with the need to reduce the impacts of development. It would also provide a more meaningful introduction to the Tuolumne River for the growing number of short-term visitors. The “environmentally preferred” alternative, Alternative 4 would

preserve and sustain wilderness character, including natural ecosystem function and opportunities for primitive, unconfined recreation, in the more than 90 percent of the river corridor that is congressionally designated Wilderness.

Improve Visitor Experience

Under the preferred alternative, future visitors to Tuolumne Meadows will experience reduced congestion on trails and roadways, unobstructed views of the meadows, an improved campground, and more clearly delineated parking areas and trailheads. A full range of orientation, interpretation, and education programs will continue to be provided, and opportunities for day visitors to connect with the river will be improved by providing a new visitor contact station, picnic area, and trail connection to the river and Parsons Memorial Lodge. Existing opportunities for traditional overnight use will be retained. To accommodate slightly increased use levels while protecting and enhancing the meadows, day use would generally be confined to formally maintained trails and specific destinations. The following specific actions will accomplish these goals:

The Tuolumne Meadows Campground will be rehabilitated while remaining at its current capacity of 329 sites and 7 group sites. Primary improvements will include upgrading and adding restrooms, repairing the campground roads, delineating camping spots to reduce resource damage, relocating the entrance road and kiosk out of the floodplain, and relocating campsites away from the river.

- The Tuolumne Lodge will remain at its current capacity with some facilities relocated away from the river and a new shower house provided for guests and members of the public.
- A new visitor contact station and trailhead parking lot will be built in a central location on the south side of Tioga Road to replace the existing visitor center in Tuolumne Meadows. The new facility will offer easy access to the Parsons Memorial Lodge trail across the meadows. Also, a new trail will be provided along Tioga Road to connect the visitor contact station with the campground, store and grill.
- The existing visitor center will be converted to administrative uses and trailhead parking for Cathedral Lakes, with a connecting trail constructed.
- The Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp will continue its operation at a slightly reduced capacity (-4 beds).



- Private whitewater boating will be allowed on a trial basis through the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, from Pothole Dome to Pate Valley, within the current wilderness permit quota system.
- Picnic areas will be improved and expanded at Lembert Dome and at the store and grill.

Protect the Tuolumne River’s Health

Historic sheep grazing and inadvertent visitor actions have resulted in localized effects on meadows and riparian areas in Tuolumne Meadows. The Tuolumne River Plan will address these issues through a comprehensive ecological restoration program. Following are specifics of this program along with other actions that will restore the ecological health and beauty of the meadows:

- Restoring 171 acres of meadow and riparian habitat and 2 acres of upland habitat.
- Directing river access to resilient areas and restoring native riparian vegetation.
- Removing or mitigating the effects of trails and roads through meadows by re-routing trails, repairing culverts to improve hydrologic connectivity, and fencing restoration areas.
- Removing roadside parking and replacing it with designated parking lots in more durable upland areas nearby.
- Consolidating NPS and concessioner stables to minimize the development footprint.
- Upgrading the wastewater treatment plant to

tertiary treatment.

- Implementing water conservation measures in Tuolumne Meadows, including upgrading water distribution lines and fixtures to be more efficient, installing water meters, and limiting water withdrawals from the river to 10% of low flows.
- Relocating all development from within 100 feet of the river, including 21 campsites at the Tuolumne Meadows Campground.
- Reducing the impacts of the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp by reducing packstock resupply trips, limiting water consumption and associated wastewater production, and replacing flush toilets with composters.
- Reducing pack stock use and associated impacts on trails in the river corridor by discontinuing commercial day rides.
- Designating stock campsites in Lyell Canyon and limiting stock access to times when meadows are “range-ready” based on snowfall and rain patterns.

Manage Visitor Use to Ensure High Quality Visitor Experience

Visitation levels will be limited to those seen over the past several years with a maximum of 4,727 visitors to the Tuolumne River corridor. Day-use capacity will be managed by controlling parking supply and public transit use and through ongoing monitoring. Overnight-use capacity will be managed through wilderness permits, reservation systems

for lodging and camping, and associated parking supply. To improve scenic vistas, reduce congestion, and address safety hazards, roadside parking along Tioga Road will be removed. Parking will instead be directed to designated parking lots in less visible and less sensitive upland areas nearby with a limited number of scenic viewing pullouts retained. The total amount of parking will increase slightly. Finally, commercial day rides will be discontinued from Tuolumne Meadows, significantly reducing the conflicts between hikers and stock users on trails.

Response to Public Comment and Stakeholders

The preferred alternative in the Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS contains a number of changes in response to public comment and consultation. The key revisions made in response to comments, agency feedback, and new technical information include:

- The Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp will be retained at up to 28 beds, with the actual capacity limited to that which can be accommodated with two stock resupply trips per week. No tents would be removed, but the capacity of two tents would be reduced from four beds to two beds. Water consumption and wastewater production at the camp would not exceed 500 gallons per day.
- Limited boating would be allowed through the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne, from Pothole Dome to Pate Valley. The NPS would provide for this use on a trial basis, monitoring and adjusting the management as needed.

- The NPS would seek to move the dining hall and kitchen at Tuolumne Meadows Lodge upslope within the Tuolumne Meadows Lodge complex, more than 150 feet from the banks of the Dana Fork. This move would be dependent on identification of a suitable site and consultation with the California State Historic Preservation Officer.
- The grazing capacity for meadows along the Lyell Fork would be adjusted from a capacity of 192 grazing-nights per season to a flexible capacity of 167 – 249 grazing-nights per season, depending on snowfall and rainfall patterns.
- An employee fuel station would be provided at the maintenance yard. Visitors who ran out of gas could also obtain fuel.
- The mountaineering school would be relocated but continue to operate out of the Tuolumne Lodge.

Collaboration

The *Final Tuolumne River Plan/EIS* is the product of many years of scientific study, multi-agency and tribal collaboration, and the involvement of an enthusiastic public. The final plan has been deeply shaped by coordination and consultation with members of the public, traditionally-associated American Indian tribes and groups, historic preservation experts, and other stakeholders. Many of the changes between the draft and final plan were the direct result of concerns raised during public meetings or consultation efforts. These activities have given the NPS a stronger plan that will improve visitor experience and better protect the Tuolumne River's unique values for the next several decades.

