

Yosemite National Park

Tuolumne Wild & Scenic River

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

“It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers... shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.” -The Wild & Scenic Rivers Act of 1968

What is the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act?

Congress passed the Wild and Scenic River Act (WSRA) in 1968 to protect designated rivers and their unique characteristics so that they could be preserved in their free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Specifically, WSRA directs federal agencies to protect and enhance designated rivers, allowing recreational activities that are protective of river values while preserving a river’s free-flowing condition, high water quality, and regionally or nationally significant features that merit their inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Why is there a need for WSRA?

By the 1950s, decades of damming, development, and diversion had taken a toll on our country’s rivers. During the 1960s the country began to recognize the damage we were inflicting on wildlife, the landscape, our drinking water, and our legacy. Congress, recognizing this situation, passed WSRA in 1968 to preserve the beauty and free-flowing nature of some of our most precious waterways. By restricting the type and level of use on a river, WSRA plays an important role in preserving the free-flow, high water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) of a river, so that future generations can have the same opportunity to enjoy these magnificent rivers.

As of July 2011, the Wild and Scenic River System protects 12,598 miles of 203 rivers in 39 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; this is less than one-quarter of one percent of the nation’s rivers. By comparison, more than 75,000 large dams across the country have modified at least 600,000 miles, or about 17%, of American rivers.

What is protected under WSRA?

Qualified rivers and their immediate environment (generally within ¼ mile of the banks of the river) are protected under the Act. River segments are classified as wild, scenic, or recreational depending on the accessibility and level of infrastructure of the segment. The segment’s classification dictates the appropriate land uses and management actions needed to guarantee the river values are protected and enhanced.

The Act requires that the managing agency protect and enhance ORVs, which are a river’s scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values that are rare, unique, or exemplary on a regional or national scale. For the Tuolumne River, these features include (but are not limited to) cultural landscapes, meadows and riparian habitat, cascading waterfalls, alpine vistas, and rugged granite canyons. Ensuring the protection and enhancement of the river’s free flowing condition, water quality, and ORVs is mandated by WSRA.

How does WSRA affect policies in National Parks?

The National Park Service is responsible for 38 rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires managing agencies to develop comprehensive management plans to protect and enhance the free-flowing conditions, water quality, and ORVs for which a river was designated while providing for appropriate types and levels of public use and enjoyment. It is notable that Congress does not identify the ORVs for a particular river; this is instead the responsibility of the managing agency. The comprehensive management plan must include the following components:

- A description of resource conditions, including a detailed description of river values (free flow, water quality, and ORVs)
- Goals and desired conditions to protect the river's free-flowing condition, water quality, and ORVs
- Direction for visitor use and capacity management
- A framework for future development and activities on federal lands in the river corridor
- A monitoring strategy, specifically related to protecting the river's free-flowing condition, water quality and ORVs

The plan will serve as the policy document that guides management actions within the river corridor for the next 20 years or more. In concert with a management plan, the park must complete an environmental impact statement, ensuring the public has frequent and robust opportunities for comment on the management of the river corridor.

Why was the Tuolumne River included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System?

Recognizing the Tuolumne River's exceptional characteristics and seeking to preserve its free-flowing nature, Congress in 1984 included 83 Miles of the river (54 miles in the park) in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Congress was responding to public demand to preserve the remaining free-flowing stretches of the Tuolumne from impoundment, including a 1970s proposal to construct three new dams on the 30-mile stretch downstream of Yosemite. Today, the Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River protects classic stair step river morphology, splendid views, lush meadow and riparian complexes, and opportunities for primitive, self-reliant recreation in the park, as well as one of the state's premier whitewater river rafting stretches below the park.

Does the Tuolumne River have a Comprehensive Management Plan?

The National Park Service began developing a comprehensive management plan for the Tuolumne River in 2005. Public input was regularly sought throughout the development of the plan, including public scoping in 2006, two planning workbooks, and "Planner for a Day Workshops". The input received helped shape the alternatives substantially. In the winter of 2012-13, the National Park Service will provide the public with the opportunity to review and comment on the plan and the draft environmental impact statement.

How to stay involved

Learn more about this plan, including open house dates and other information on the Tuolumne River Plan website at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/trp.htm. You can also follow this and other park plans on Facebook at www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS.

Comment on this draft comprehensive management plan and environmental impact statement by visiting the Tuolumne River Plan Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/trp_deis. Electronic comment submittal through PEPC saves resources and allows for direct entry into the NPS comment analysis system. Alternatively, comments can be emailed to yose_planning@nps.gov, faxed to 209/379-1294 or mailed to:

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