

Yosemite National Park

Merced Wild & Scenic River Plan

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 for public uses that are protective of river values while preserving a river's free-flowing condition, 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 natural and cultural resources, the landscape, our drinking water and our legacy. Recognition of this fact led Congress to preserve the beauty and free-flowing nature of some of our most precious waterways. By managing the type and level of use in a river corridor, WSRA plays an important role in preserving the free-flow, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) of a river, so that future generations can have the same opportunity to enjoy these magnificent 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 level of development on the shoreline and the accessibility of the segment at the time of the river's designation. The segment's classification guides appropriate land uses and informs management actions needed to guarantee the river values are protected and enhanced.

The Act requires that the managing agency protect and enhance the 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 Merced River, these features include (but are not limited to) cultural landscapes, meadows and riparian habitat, and iconic scenery borne of glaciation in Yosemite Valley. Ensuring the protection and enhancement of the river's free flowing condition, water quality, and ORVs are mandated by WSRA.

How many rivers are protected under WSRA?

As of July 2011, the National 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.

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

Recognizing the Merced River's exceptional characteristics and seeking to preserve its free-flowing nature, Congress in 1987 added the 81 miles of the Merced River within Yosemite National Park into the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Merced River in Yosemite Valley is a rare example of a mid-elevation alluvial river, offering spectacular views of lush meadow and riparian complexes. Archeological sites in Yosemite Valley, Wawona and El Portal contain dense concentrations of resources that represent thousands of years of human settlement. Visitors to federally designated wilderness can enjoy primitive and unconfined recreation, while visitors to Yosemite Valley enjoy a wide variety of river-related recreational activities in the Valley's extraordinary setting along the Merced River.

How does WSRA affect the Merced River?

All federal planning projects related to a Wild and Scenic River must protect and enhance the ORVs for which the river was designated while providing for appropriate types and levels of public use and enjoyment. It is notable that Congress does not usually identify the ORVs for a particular river; this is instead the responsibility of the managing agency. Once these ORVs are identified, park staff must determine how they can best be protected through preparation of a comprehensive management plan. The Merced River Plan will 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

This plan will serve as the policy document that guides management actions within the river corridor for the next 15–20 years. In concert with this management plan, the park must complete an environmental impact statement, ensuring the public has frequent and robust opportunities to comment on the management of the Merced River corridor.

Find Out More

If you're interested in learning more about the Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, you can download the entire document at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm. For those that have the time, reading the entire document will convey the fullest understanding of the plan. For those interested in an overview of the Merced River Plan, park staff suggest you begin with:

- Summary Guide for the Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan/ DEIS
- These sections of Chapter 8: Alternatives:
 - Actions Common to Alternatives 2-6
 - Overview section of Alternatives 2-6 (includes map series for each alternative)
 - Full narrative for Alternative 5 (Preferred Alternative)

Tell Us What You Think

Comment on this draft environmental impact statement by visiting the Merced River Plan Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/mrp_deis. Electronic comment submittal through PEPC saves resources and allows for direct entry to the NPS comment analysis system. Comments can also be submitted by email to yose_planning@nps.gov or by U.S. mail at the following address:

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