



# Summary Guide

for the

Merced Wild and Scenic River  
Draft Comprehensive Management Plan  
and Environmental Impact Statement





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Hiking on the Mist Trail is one way people interact with the Merced River. This trail offers views of Vernal and Nevada Falls and gives access to Little Yosemite Valley.

## Where to Learn More

**Enclosed CD:** Find a CD containing the full draft plan on the inside back cover of this document.

**Online Resources:** Look on Yosemite National Park’s website for information regarding the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* at [www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm). Access documents, graphics, useful web links, the schedule of public meetings and webinars, and official public comment instructions. Online files include an electronic version of the document along with related maps, conceptual site drawings, and outreach materials, including this summary guide.

**Meeting Schedule:** As part of its robust outreach effort in early 2013, the park will present several informational webinars and public meetings. The Yosemite Open House includes plan updates and is held the last Wednesday of every month. Additional public meetings will be held in the park and in various gateway communities. View a schedule of public webinar and workshops online.

**Public Comment:** Additional detail about how to submit public comment and where to learn more about the plan is included at the end of this guide.

**COVER:** Top Photo by Christine White Loberg  
The Merced Wild and Scenic River, shown flowing by the iconic El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, meanders 81 miles through Yosemite National Park.

All other photos by NPS.

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**Interactive Map:** Access an interactive mapping tool that allows you to view components of the draft plan alternatives, at <http://imgis.nps.gov/yose>.

**Stay Involved:** Sign up for our park electronic newsletter to receive periodic updates about how to stay involved in the plan or follow the park on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS](http://www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS).

**Contact Us:** You can contact Yosemite National Park’s Planning Division to request a document or to join the park’s email list by calling 209/379-1365 or by emailing [yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:yose_planning@nps.gov). For general inquiries, call 209/379-1110.



Boating, in the picturesque setting of Yosemite Valley, continues to be a prime recreation opportunity in all the Merced River Draft Plan’s action alternatives.

## Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Plan Summary Guide

This *Summary Guide* serves several purposes. Because the *Merced Wild and Scenic Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* runs more than 2,500 pages, this guide is intended to direct reviewers to key areas of the document with information most likely to be of interest to the public. This guide also provides a concise summary of the planning process and the analytical framework for the draft plan and gives insight into important considerations for managing a Wild and Scenic River within a national park. Finally, this guide directs the reviewer to additional resources that are available to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the draft plan and its environmental consequences.

This *Summary Guide* engages the public in a conversation about what it means to “protect and enhance” river values under the auspices of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) and describes the process for accomplishing this mandate. To that end, this guide explains how to submit formal comment on the draft plan and how to stay involved during this phase of the project. Please review the draft plan and its range of alternatives and send us your written comments during the 90-day public comment period. Instructions for submitting formal comments are detailed on the final page of this guide.

In addition to reading this guide, we suggest members of the public develop an understanding of the proposed actions by beginning with the

following sections of the full *Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*:

- Document Organization (Chapter 1: page 1–4)
- Alternatives (Chapter 8)
- Process Used to Develop the Alternatives (Chapter 8: pages 8–1 to 8–7)
  - Actions Common to Alternatives 2-6 (Chapter 8: pages 8–53 to 8–102)
  - Alternative 1 (No Action) Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–13 to 8–28)
  - Alternative 2 Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–103 to 8–118)
  - Alternative 3 Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–145 to 8–160)
  - Alternative 4 Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–187 to 8–203)
  - Alternative 5 (Preferred) Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–231 to 8–246)
  - Alternative 6 Overview (Chapter 8: pages 8–273 to 8–288)

Readers who wish to review the draft plan in more depth will find more decision-making details here:

- Goals of the Merced River Plan (Chapter 1: page 1–3)
- Identification of Planning Issues: Public and Internal Scoping (Chapter 2: pages 2–13 to 2–18)
- Part III User Capacity Discussion (Chapter 6: pages 6–12 to 6–43)

## The Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Plan

Through this *Summary Guide*, we are pleased to highlight elements of the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. The January 2013 draft plan represents many years of scientific study, multi-agency and tribal collaboration, and the involvement of an enthusiastic public. This draft plan brings forward the best in science, stewardship, and public engagement to create a vision for protecting the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

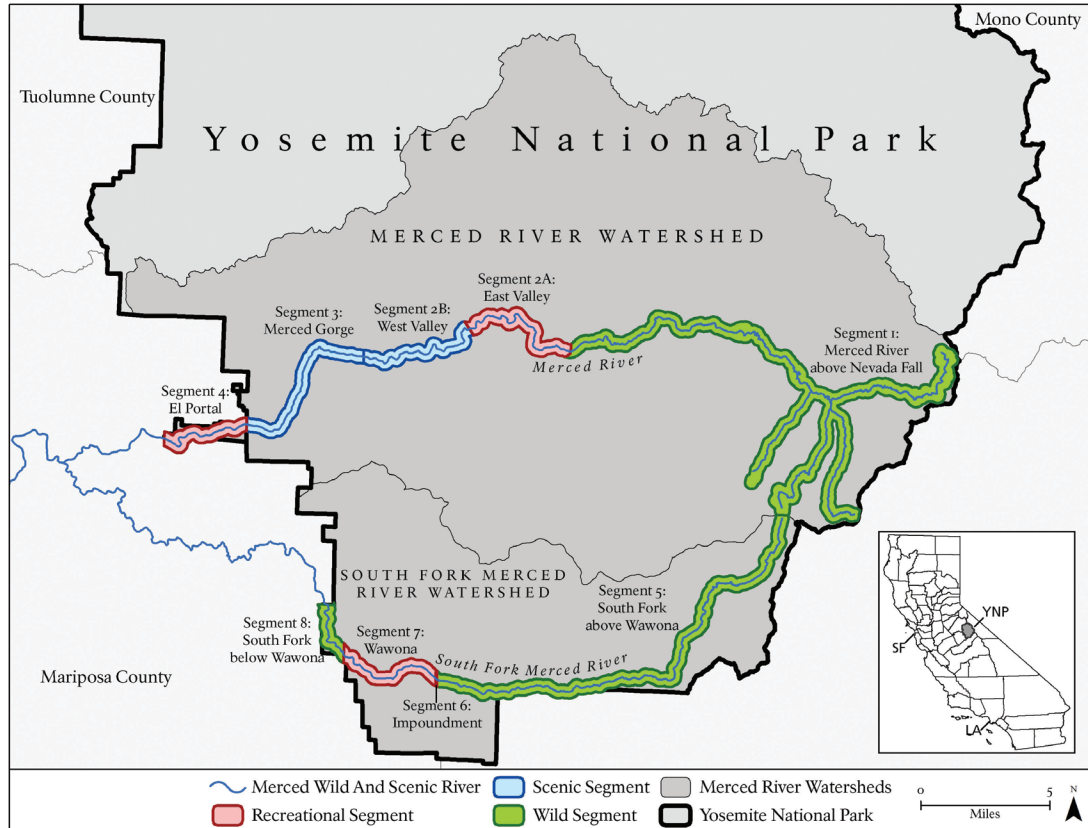


The *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* will be the guiding document for protecting and enhancing river values and

managing use within the Merced River corridor in Yosemite National Park for the next 20 years. The draft plan includes specific actions to correct resource impacts, establishes numerical limits on the kinds and amounts of use allowed in the river corridor, and features an expanded monitoring program to protect and enhance river values and visitor experiences over time.

The draft plan addresses all elements required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) for the management of a designated river. It analyzes these elements by following and documenting planning processes required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other legal mandates governing National Park Service (NPS) decision-making.

## The Merced Wild and Scenic River



The Merced Wild and Scenic River, designated in 1987, includes 122 miles of the Merced River on the western side of the Sierra Nevada range in California. The NPS manages 81 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River through Yosemite National Park, including the headwaters and both the Merced River's main stem and the South Fork Merced River. As the Merced River flows outside Yosemite's western boundary, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management manage the next 41 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River.

The main stem of the Merced River originates high in the Sierra Nevada on the eastern side of Yosemite in several watersheds: the Lyell Fork, Triple Peak Fork, Merced Peak Fork, and Red Peak Fork. From its headwaters, the main stem of the Merced River flows freely through Yosemite's Wilderness, a landscape of alpine peaks, glacially carved valleys, and high-elevation meadows. The river makes a dramatic entry into Yosemite Valley, rushing over towering cliffs in prominent waterfalls. As the river's gradient lessens, it meanders through the rich meadow and riparian habitat of Yosemite Valley. At the west end of Yosemite Valley, the Merced River canyon narrows, and the river becomes a cascade of continuous rapids through the Merced Gorge. The gradient changes abruptly at the park boundary, where the river continues

through the El Portal Administrative Site on its journey to the Central Valley of California.

The South Fork Merced River originates high in the Sierra Nevada on the eastern side of Yosemite National Park, draining the southwestern slopes of Triple Divide Peak and the west facing slopes of Gale Peak and Sing Peak. From its headwaters, the South Fork Merced River flows southwest through the Yosemite Wilderness and eventually through the town of Wawona. At the western park boundary, the South Fork flows through the Sierra National Forest to the confluence of the main stem of the Merced River west of El Portal.

The river has been central to a dynamic natural and cultural landscape for tens of thousands of years, and it continues to shape the landscape today. Ecological processes between the river and its floodplain support a wide elevational range of riparian and meadow communities providing habitat for a rich diversity of plants and wildlife. The river's cultural heritage includes American Indian cultural traditions associated with the river that continue to the present day, along with the history associated with one of the nation's first national parks. Today, the Merced River attracts millions of Yosemite visitors who enjoy opportunities for recreation, education, reflection, and inspiration in the sublime beauty of the river corridor.



## River Values

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires comprehensive planning for Wild and Scenic Rivers to provide for the protection and enhancement of the river's free-flowing condition, water quality, and the outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) that make it worthy of designation in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. In accordance with WSRA, "the plan shall address resource protection, development of lands and facilities, user capacities, and other management practices necessary or desirable to achieve the purposes of this Act" (WSRA 1968, Section 3(d)).

WSRA provides the following broad direction related to river management (emphasis added):

"Each component of the national Wild and Scenic Rivers System shall be administered in such manner as to protect and enhance the values which caused it to be included in said system without, insofar as is consistent therewith, limiting other uses that do not substantially interfere with public use and enjoyment of these values. In such administration primary emphasis shall be given to protecting its aesthetic, scenic, historic, archaeological, and scientific features. Management plans for any such component may establish varying degrees of intensity for its protection and development, based on the special attributes of the area." ( WSRA 1968, Section 10(a))

**River Values:** The Merced River was added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in acknowledgement of the river's free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs). Collectively, these qualities are referred to as "river values." Under the draft plan, protection and enhancement of river values is accomplished by a series of actions to address immediate concerns and a commitment to a long-term monitoring program that will ensure that river values remain protected over time.

**Free-flowing Condition:** A river must be in a free-flowing state to be eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. A free-flowing river, or section of a river, moves in a natural condition without impoundment, diversion, straightening, riprapping, or other modification of the waterway. Once a river is designated, the managing agency is required to preserve it in its free-flowing condition for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. The Merced River in Yosemite is free-flowing with few impediments. Under the draft plan, the NPS will protect its free-flowing condition by implementing a process under Section 7 of WSRA to ensure that no potential water resource project within the bed

and banks of the river would have a direct and adverse effect.

**Water Quality:** Another WSRA mandate is to protect the water quality of designated rivers. The Merced River in Yosemite has exceptionally high water quality. All measured indicators are within NPS standards, which are considerably more protective than other federal or state standards. The draft plan addresses risks to water quality with a suite of actions to address potential impacts, coupled with an ongoing monitoring program that will continue to test for nutrients, E. coli, and petroleum hydrocarbons to ensure that the exceptional baseline water quality is sustained over time.

WSRA describes values to be protected with Wild and Scenic River designation:

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be preserved for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."(WSRA, 1968, Section 1(b))

**Outstandingly Remarkable Values:** ORVs are the truly exemplary characteristics of the river that make it worthy of inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council (IWSRCC), which makes recommendations to foster consistency in the interpretation and implementation of WSRA, issued specific guidance and criteria for identifying ORVs:

- To be considered an ORV, a value must be river-related or river-dependent. To be considered river-related or river-dependent, a value must be located in the river or on its immediate shorelands (generally within 0.25 mile on either side of the river); contribute substantially to the functioning of the river ecosystem; and/ or owe its location or existence to the presence of the river.
- To be considered an ORV, a value must be rare, unique, or exemplary in a regional or national context. To be considered rare, unique, or exemplary, a value should be a conspicuous example from among a number of similar values that are themselves uncommon or extraordinary.



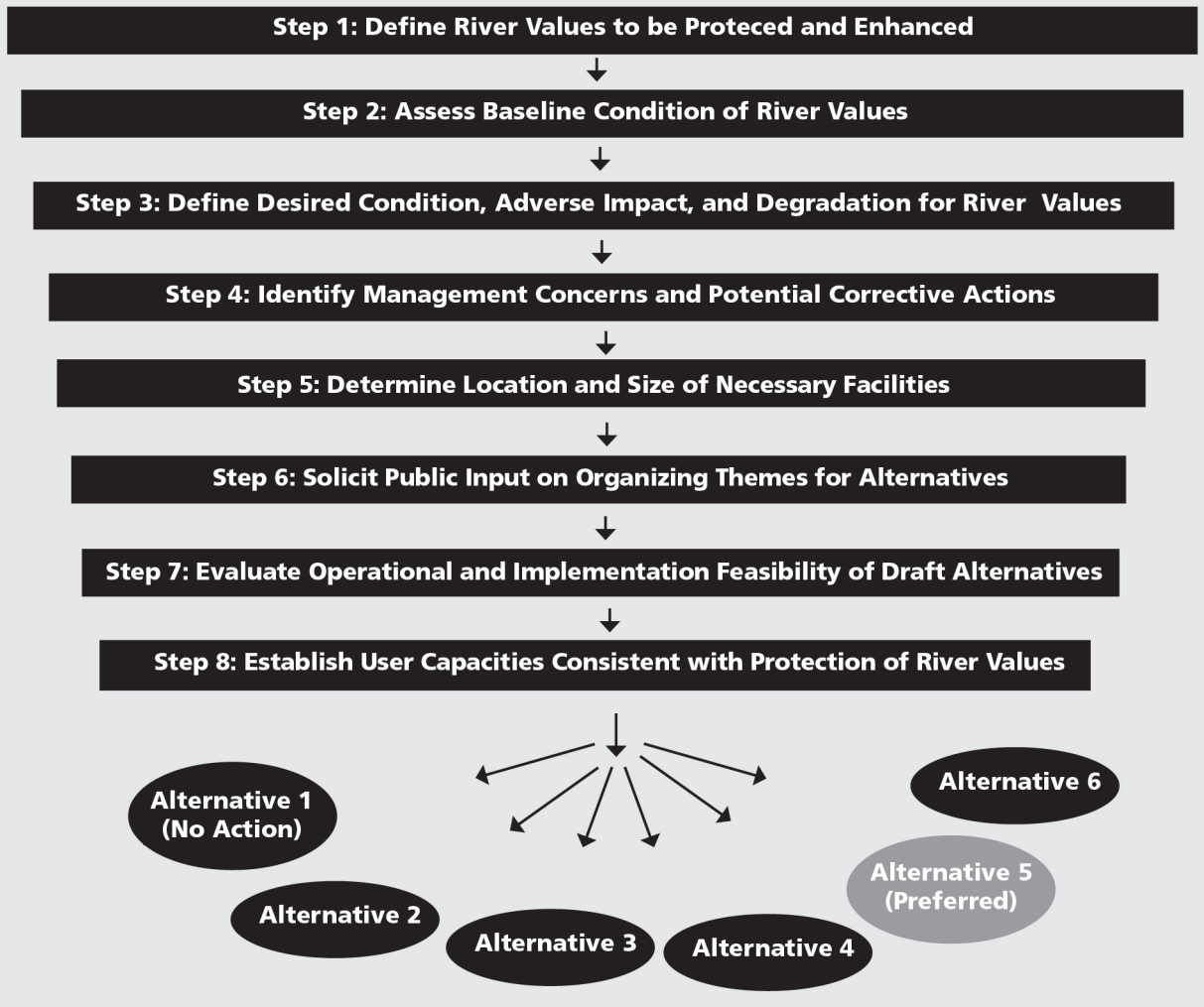
## Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River

Biological	<b>Segments 1 and 5:</b> The Merced River sustains numerous small meadows and riparian habitat with high biological integrity.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> The meadows and riparian communities of Yosemite Valley comprise one of the largest mid-elevation meadow-riparian complexes in the Sierra Nevada.
	<b>Segments 7 and 8:</b> Sierra sweet bay ( <i>Myrica hartwegii</i> ) is a rare plant found on river banks of the South Fork Merced River.
Geologic / Hydrologic	<b>Segment 1:</b> The upper Merced River canyon is a textbook example of a glacially-carved canyon.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> The “Giant Staircase,” which includes Vernal and Nevada falls, is one of the finest examples in the western United States of stair-step river morphology.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> The Merced River from Happy Isles to the west end of Yosemite Valley provides an outstanding example of a rare, mid-elevation alluvial river.
	<b>Segment 4:</b> The boulder bar in El Portal was created by changing river gradients, glacial history, and powerful floods. These elements have resulted in accumulation of extraordinarily large boulders, which are rare in such deposits.
Cultural	<b>Segment 2:</b> Yosemite Valley American Indian ethnographic resources include a linked landscape of specifically mapped traditional-use plant populations and as well as the ongoing traditional cultural practices that reflect the intricate continuing relationship between indigenous peoples of the Yosemite region and the Merced River in Yosemite Valley.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> The Yosemite Valley Archeological District is an unusually rich and linked landscape that contains dense concentrations of resources that represent thousands of years of human settlement.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> The Yosemite Valley Historic Resources represent a linked landscape of river-related or river-dependent, rare, unique or exemplary buildings and structures that bear witness to the historical significance of the river system.
	<b>Segment 4:</b> The El Portal Archeological District contains dense concentrations of resources that represent thousands of years of occupation and evidence of continuous, far-reaching traffic and trade. This segment includes some of the oldest deposits in the region and archeological remains of the Johnny Wilson Ranch, a regionally rare historic-era American Indian Homestead.
	<b>Segment 5:</b> This segment includes regionally rare archeological features representing indigenous settlement and use along the South Fork Merced River at archeological sites with rock ring features.
	<b>Segments 5, 6, 7, and 8:</b> The Wawona Archeological District encompasses numerous clusters of resources spanning thousands of years of occupation, including unusually rich evidence of continuous far-reaching traffic and trade. In Segment 7, remains of the U.S. Army Cavalry Camp A. E. Wood document the unique Yosemite legacy of the African-American Buffalo Soldiers and the strategic placement of their camp near the Merced River.
	<b>Segment 7:</b> The Wawona Historic Resources ORV includes one of the few covered bridges in the region and the National Historic Landmark Wawona Hotel complex. The Wawona Hotel complex is the largest existing Victorian hotel complex within the boundaries of a national park, and one of the few remaining in the United States with this high level of integrity.
Scenic	<b>Segment 1:</b> Visitors to this Wilderness segment experience exemplary views of serene montane lakes, pristine meadows, slickrock cascades, and High Sierra peaks.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> Visitors to Yosemite Valley experience views of some of the world’s most iconic scenery, with the river and meadows forming a placid foreground to towering cliffs and waterfalls.
	<b>Segment 3:</b> The Merced River drops 2,000 feet over 14 miles, a continuous cascade under exemplary Sierra granite outcrops and domes.
	<b>Segments 5 and 8:</b> The South Fork Merced River passes through a vast area of exemplary and wild scenic beauty.
Recreational	<b>Segment 1:</b> Visitors to federally designated Wilderness in the corridor engage in a variety of river-related activities in an iconic High Sierra landscape, where opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, self-reliance, and solitude shape the experience.
	<b>Segment 2:</b> Visitors to Yosemite Valley enjoy a wide variety of river-related recreational activities in the Valley’s extraordinary setting along the Merced River.



# Creating Alternatives for Merced River Plan

*A Generalized Planning Process*



## Foundational Elements

### The Merced River Planning Framework

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to rigorously explore a range of reasonable alternatives when planning for a major federal action. NEPA also mandates an early and open process to determine the scope of issues surrounding the proposed action, to develop options for addressing those issues, and to provide for public review and comment on the environmental analyses presented in the project’s draft environmental impact statement (DEIS).

Using a full complement of park personnel, including experts in park operations, facilities, and cultural and natural resources, the Merced River planning team devoted several years of effort to develop five action alternatives (Alternatives 2-6) for managing the river corridor. In building the alternatives, the team worked within a planning

framework that included eight major steps, which are explained below. Although this framework is described as a series of sequential activities, planning is fundamentally iterative. At each step, new information is uncovered and new insight is gained that can trigger changes to prior decisions. Extensive internal review and public input affected the process. Although time-consuming, this process of review and revision ultimately lead to a stronger end product. The following sections provide greater detail with regard to each step in the planning process.

### *Step 1: Define River Values to be Protected and Enhanced*

The WSRA mandates that each Wild and Scenic River “... shall be administered in such manner as to protect and enhance the values which caused it to be included in said system” (WSRA, Section 10 (a)).



## Foundational Elements:

The NPS began the process of identifying the ORVs for the Merced River in 1996. After completing other steps in the alternative development process, park planners re-visited the ORVs (in 2000, 2005, and 2009).

The planning team conducted internal ORV workshops, drawing upon scientific information, subject-matter expertise, peer review, government partners, management input, and expert guidance from other Wild and Scenic River professionals. Public scoping comments regarding ORVs were integrated into the *Draft 2010 Outstandingly Remarkable Values Report for the Merced Wild and Scenic River*, which represented the culmination of this work.

### *Step 2: Assess Baseline Condition of River Values*

Information used to evaluate the baseline condition of the Merced River ORVs included historic photos, maps, and archival materials; research studies and models of natural systems developed specifically for this planning effort; and the professional judgment of experienced subject-matter specialists. External peer reviews of specific research findings and the implications for overall river conditions were solicited.

The park planning team consolidated this information into the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Values Draft Baseline Conditions Report*. The assessment was also incorporated into “River Values and Their Management” (Chapter 5) of the draft plan. The report provides an assessment of river values at the time of the river’s designation (1987) and represents the existing (or “baseline”) condition of those values. This part of the planning process provides a basis for comparison with the expected outcome of the actions described in the alternatives. It was also essential for identifying areas where actions must be taken to improve conditions in the river corridor.

### *Step 3: Define Desired Condition, Adverse Effect, and Degradation for River Values*

In concert with assessing river values, NPS park managers determined the desired condition for those values, based on guiding legislation, available research and monitoring information, best professional judgment, and current trends in the relevant academic and public land management fields. A comprehensive river management plan must contain provisions designed to prevent any adverse effect or degradation from occurring to the river values. Specific thresholds must be stated for mandatory management action that will occur

ahead of any such impacts or degradation, to keep the state of river values at or above the desired condition (see Chapter 5).

Park managers developed indicators of river-value condition that are sensitive to change, along with the monitoring protocols needed to standardize data collection over time. By following these protocols, park managers will have early indications of changing conditions and be able to correct downward trends before they broach management standards.

### *Step 4: Identify Management Concerns and Potential Corrective Actions*

This step involves applying the definitions of management standard, adverse effect, and degradation to the existing river value conditions. By comparing the actual river condition to the management standard, park managers obtained a clear picture of which values needed remedial action to bring them up to the management standard or forestall a downward trend in conditions. In addition, due to the comprehensive and systematic nature of this review, a host of localized areas of concern were identified as places where action could be taken to enhance river values.

The planning team separated this step of the process into two stages, primary and secondary scope. The primary scope evaluation was completed first to ensure all alternatives would include protective measures to remedy problems identified with natural and cultural ORVs. The ecological restoration program (detailed in Appendix E) forms the centerpiece of restoration actions in the draft plan. Actions must also correct past impacts to the extent possible. By identifying all known areas of concern and options for corrective actions, managers ensured all alternatives would protect and enhance river values. These actions form the core of all action alternatives.

The next stage, or secondary scope evaluation, pertained to issues related to visitor use, including congestion, transportation and visitor experience. Transportation modeling identified the limitations associated with the existing road system design and options for improving traffic flow. Various mixes of parking, overnight accommodations, camping, and services were packaged to provide for significantly different visitor experiences within the range of alternatives.

A summary of the primary and secondary scope issues, along with potential solutions, was

## Foundational Elements:

developed and packaged as the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Planning Workbook* (fall 2011). The NPS conducted five workshops in conjunction with the release of the workbook to gather public feedback on the range of potential options developed to protect and enhance river values.

### *Step 5: Determine Location and Size of Necessary Facilities*

WSRA and its implementing guidelines provide direction on the types of facilities that are allowed in designated river corridors. In addition, the 2008 opinion of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on the 2005 *Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan* questioned whether the level of development in some parts of the river corridor was protective of ORVs. The planning team, therefore, evaluated existing facilities and services within the river corridor to determine whether they should be retained, removed or relocated in order to protect and enhance river values.

Chapter 5 identifies locations where the development footprint, visitor uses and /or administrative uses were found to be causing local effects to components of river values.

Chapter 7 presents the results of the planning team's analysis of all existing public-use facilities and services to determine whether they are currently impacting any river values and, if so, how those impacts could be eliminated. In Chapter 8, the alternatives address the removal, redesign, and/ or relocation of those facilities.

### *Step 6: Solicit Public Input on Alternatives*

Public input was solicited on a regular basis throughout the project, from public scoping through the review and revision of this draft plan. Major topics discussed included the ORVs, their conditions, and indicators to assess those conditions; user capacity; other planning issues the alternatives needed to address; organizing concepts or themes for the alternatives, site plan concepts, and the preliminary alternatives themselves.

Gateway communities, organizations, and interested members of the public have provided nearly 1,500 public correspondences. The NPS has conducted more than 40 public meetings, presentations, workshops, field visits, and open houses in support of the EIS process. Two planning workbooks were prepared and distributed for public review and comment (fall 2011 and spring 2012) prior to completion of the draft plan.

### *Step 7: Evaluate Operational and Implementation Feasibility of Draft Alternatives*

Once draft action alternatives were completed, park planners put them through several rounds of review and critique by park managers, field staff, and resource experts. Planners examined all site proposals and management actions, ensuring that no unresolvable operational or logistical conflicts remained within individual alternatives. Cost estimates were developed for the alternatives, to ensure they were reasonable and feasible.

### *Step 8: Establish User Capacities Consistent with Protection of River Values*

WSRA and its implementing guidelines direct managing agencies to address user capacity in river management plans and to establish “the kinds and amounts of public use which the river area can sustain without impact to the values for which it was designated.” As with the other steps above, public input was a fundamental part of this process. The NPS asked the public to describe what activities they enjoy in the Merced River corridor, to help define the Recreational ORV and begin to address the issue of kinds and amounts of use the river can sustain. User-capacity experts developed a nine-step process to address user-capacity mandates (see Chapter 6). These steps were integrated into the overall planning process. User capacities were adjusted to reflect the experiences envisioned within each alternative. Planners produced a range of user capacities and recreation types, all of which are protective of river values.



On peak use days in Yosemite Valley, traffic congestion can exceed desired standards. The Merced River Draft Plan would alleviate traffic on high-use days through a variety of management strategies.



## Overview of the Draft Plan and Alternatives

Using a full complement of park personnel, the Merced River planning team devoted several years of effort to develop six alternatives, including a No Action alternative and five action alternatives. The NPS has identified Alternative 5 as its preferred alternative, but all alternatives protect and enhance river values while providing for kinds and amounts of visitor use that are protective of river values. Collectively, these alternatives represent a wide range of choices for the future management of the Merced River corridor.

### Alternative Comparison: A Range of Actions

	Alt 2	Alt 3	Alt 4	Alt 5 (Preferred)	Alt 6
<b>Common to All Action Alternatives</b>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restoration</li> <li>• User Capacity</li> <li>• Mitigation Measures</li> <li>• Best Management Practices</li> <li>• Wild and Scenic River mandates</li> <li>• Outstandingly Remarkable Values</li> </ul>					
<b>Restoration Values</b>	Major restoration in the 100-year floodplain: 347 acres restored	Significant restoration within 150 feet of river: 302 acres restored	Targeted restoration within 150 feet of river: 223 acres restored	Essential restoration within 100 feet of river: 203 acres restored	Limited restoration within 100 feet of river: 170 acres restored
<b>Facilities and Services</b>	Significant reduction in facilities and services	Marked reduction in facilities and services	Reduced facilities and services with significant camping increase	Reduced facilities and services with moderate camping increase	Expanded facilities and services with largest camping increase
<b>Visitor Use (compared to current condition*)</b>	Significantly lower visitor-use levels: 13,900 people	Lowest visitor-use levels: 13,200 people	Low visitor-use levels: 17,000 people	Visitor-use levels similar to today: 19,900 people	Highest visitor-use levels: 21,800 people

\* Alternative 1 (No Action) estimates daily visitation at 20,900 people in East Yosemite Valley on peak-use days.

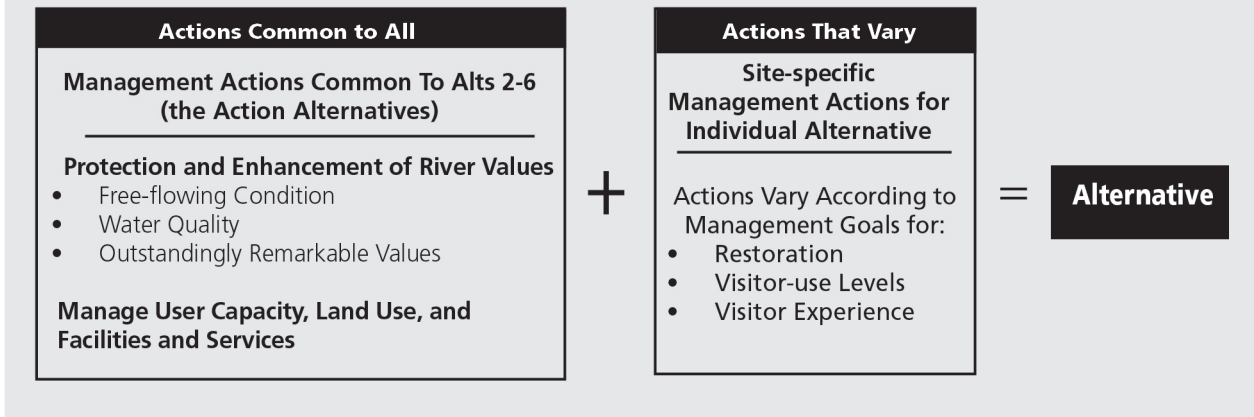
Many of the actions described in the range of alternatives are considered “Common to All” and would be implemented regardless of which alternative is selected as the final proposed action; they are considered appropriate management responses to protect river values or address significant issues or concerns in the river corridor.

These actions common to all do not constitute an independent alternative but are an integral part of Alternatives 2–6. Each alternative is made up of both the actions common to Alternatives 2–6 as well as the actions that vary across the alternatives. The common actions are the heart of the draft plan; they address how river values would be protected, regardless of how the visitor experience and related services and facilities might vary across the

range. The actions that vary across the alternative are reflective of varying degrees of ecological restoration, levels of user capacities, and of varying types of visitor experiences.

**Segments and Classifications:** Section 2 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires each segment of the river be classified as wild, scenic, or recreational based on the level of development present in the river corridor. The Merced Wild and Scenic River has eight segments, four of which are classified as recreational (Segments 2, 4, 6, 7), two wild segments (Segments 1 and 8) and one scenic segment (Segment 3), representing the management areas that have been established for the Merced River Plan. These segments and classifications are common to all action alternatives.

# Components that Equate to an Individual Alternative



## Actions Common to Alternatives 2-6

### Restoration

Multiple actions would be taken across all alternatives to ecologically restore, protect and enhance hydrologic and ecological processes, free-flowing condition, water quality, cultural resources, and meadows and riparian habitat. A 150-foot riparian buffer, measured from the ordinary high-water mark, would be protected and enhanced corridorwide. Eroded riverbanks would be repaired through restoration, and vulnerable riverbanks and riparian vegetation would be protected from trampling. Visitors would be directed to use resilient areas, such as low-angle sandbar beaches. Ditches in meadows would be filled, six miles of informal trails in meadows and riparian areas would be removed, and abandoned underground infrastructure would be removed. Informal roadside parking along meadows and associated fill material would be removed to restore meadow area and protect meadows from informal trailing. Cultural resources, such as archeological sites, would be protected from irretrievable loss.

### Transportation

Multiple actions would be implemented related to parking, traffic management, and public transit across all alternatives such as expanding public transit options while ensuring continued visitor access by personal vehicle. The Yosemite Village Day-use Parking Area (Camp 6) will be relocated at least 150 feet from the river, though the configuration and capacity varies by alternative. Under Alternatives 2-6, an East Yosemite Valley day-use parking permit system could be instituted if conditions reach a point where day-use demand frequently exceeds available day parking, and formal traffic diversions are needed for 14 or more days during the peak season for two consecutive years (see Chapter 6).

### Overnight Accommodations

New walk-in campgrounds would be provided under Alternatives 2-6 west of the Backpackers Camp (16 sites) and east of Camp 4 (35 sites). These sites would offset the number of sites that would be removed (the number of which varies across the alternatives) to restore ecological conditions. Lodging at The Ahwahnee and the Wawona Hotel would remain at current levels under all the alternatives (123 units at The Ahwahnee and 104 units at the Wawona Hotel). Lodging at other locations would differ among the alternatives.

### Recreation

Under all alternatives, private boating (rafts, kayaks, paddle boards, inner tubes, and inflatable mattresses) would continue to be allowed. An interpretive nature walk through the Lower River area that emphasizes river-related natural processes would be developed, and opportunities for picnicking would be improved at the Cathedral, Sentinel, and Swinging Bridge picnic areas. All commercial stock day rides would be discontinued in Yosemite Valley. The draft plan would enhance the sense of arrival for park visitors as they are guided toward the primary Yosemite Village Day-use Parking Area. In addition, it would reduce congestion and improve visitor experience at Bridalveil Fall by redesigning trails, boardwalks, and the viewing platform at the base of the fall, and by improving accessibility and restroom facilities.



Raised boardwalks, like this one through Cook's Meadow, provide access through wet meadows while maintaining the natural meadow connectivity and hydrologic flow.



## Overview of the Alternatives

Since 2009, Yosemite National Park has hosted more than 40 meetings to bring together park staff, park partners, and the public to engage in dialogue about the future of the Merced River corridor.



### Alternative 1: No Action

Alternative 1, also known as the “No Action Alternative,” is required by NEPA implementing regulations and serves as a baseline from which to compare the action alternatives. Alternative 1 represents existing conditions in 2011, when the NPS completed a series of research studies to assess the conditions of river values in the Merced River corridor. This alternative assumes that current trends in the conditions of natural and cultural resources and visitor experiences would continue, consistent with the management activities that are ongoing under existing plans. Future actions requiring additional planning and environmental compliance could still occur, independent of the draft plan, but they would not be considered part of the No Action Alternative.

The ORVs would continue to be protected by ongoing management programs although management considerations and concerns would continue, as discussed in Chapter 5 of the draft plan. Ecological restoration actions would be limited to those that would only require a categorical exclusion in compliance with NEPA, and those identified in the *2009 Settlement Agreement*. Although ecological restoration without a comprehensive plan could mitigate some impacts to river values, concerns associated with the current management of the river corridor (which the draft plan is intended to address) would generally continue under the No Action Alternative.

Under the No Action Alternative, existing user-capacity management actions would continue.

This includes the use of the wilderness permit system for overnight use of the backcountry, and the reservations systems for camping and lodging accommodations. Day use would remain unlimited. Traffic congestion would be managed by staff directing traffic; maximizing parking efficiency; and diverting inbound traffic away from Yosemite Valley if no parking were available during peak-use days. Pilot transit programs would continue to provide limited additional service to destinations within the river corridor and Yosemite Valley, in particular.

All existing services and facilities would be retained. Visitors would continue to have access to more locations and services than they would under the action alternatives. However, traffic congestion and crowding at popular attractions would continue to significantly degrade the quality of the experience for many visitors.



At Curry Village, all Merced River Draft Plan action alternatives remove temporary employee housing at both Boys Town (pictured) and Huff House. Replacement permanent housing will be located near Huff House.

## Overview of the Alternatives

### Alternative 2: Self-Reliant Visitor Experiences and Extensive Floodplain Restoration

The guiding principles of Alternative 2 would include maximizing the restoration of the 100-year floodplain by removing infrastructure not essential to resource-related recreation, and creating a more self-reliant visitor experience, where fewer commercial services would be available. Visitor-use levels would be managed to allow for visitor experiences free of crowding or congestion.

Management actions in Alternative 2 would:

- Restore 347 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Slightly reduce the available campsites corridorwide (-8%), including a reduction in Yosemite Valley campsites (-3%).
- Significantly reduce the available lodging corridorwide (-43%), including a reduction in Yosemite Valley lodging (-46%).
- Reduce day-use parking spaces in Yosemite Valley (-23%).
- Reduce commercial services.
- Make significant changes to traffic-circulation patterns in Yosemite Valley to accommodate ecological restoration goals and reduce traffic congestion.
- Accommodate approximately 13,900 visitors per day in East Yosemite Valley.
- Continue to manage overnight use through the wilderness permit system and a reservation system for lodging and camping.
- Manage day-use capacity for East Yosemite Valley through a parking permit system required during peak season.

### Alternative 3: Dispersed Visitor Experiences and Extensive Riverbank Restoration

The guiding principles of Alternative 3 would include restoration of large portions of the floodplain and the riparian area within 150 feet of the river. This alternative would accommodate much lower maximum visitor-use levels than today and would offer fewer commercial services and facilities. Visitor-use levels would be managed to allow for dispersed visitor experiences free of crowding or congestion.

Management actions in Alternative 3 would:

- Restore 302 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Slightly reduce the campsite inventory corridorwide(-3%) but slightly increase the campsite inventory in Yosemite Valley (+2%).

- Significantly reduce the lodging inventory corridorwide (-37%), including a significant reduction in Yosemite Valley (-40%).
- Significantly reduce day-use parking for Yosemite Valley (-32%).
- Reduce commercial services.
- Make significant changes to the traffic circulation pattern in Yosemite Valley to accommodate ecological restoration goals and reduce traffic congestion.
- Accommodate approximately 13,200 visitors per day in East Yosemite Valley.
- Continue to manage overnight use through wilderness quotas and reservation systems for lodging and camping.
- Manage day-use capacity for East Yosemite Valley through permits and a reservation system required during peak season.

### Alternative 4: Resource-Based Visitor Experiences and Targeted Riverbank Restoration

The guiding principles of Alternative 4 include restoration of portions of the floodplain and the riparian area within 150 feet of the river. This alternative focuses on providing only those commercial services and facilities that facilitate resource-based visitor experiences. It accommodates lower maximum visitor use levels than today, with large increases in overnight camping capacity, and moderate decrease in the overnight lodging capacity.

Management actions in Alternative 4 would:

- Restore 223 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Significantly increase the campsite inventory corridorwide (+37%), including an increase in the Yosemite Valley campsite inventory (+50%).
- Reduce the lodging inventory corridorwide (-20%) and in Yosemite Valley (-20%).
- Reduce day-use parking for Yosemite Valley (-12%).
- Reduce commercial services.
- Make targeted changes to the traffic circulation pattern in Yosemite Valley to accommodate ecological restoration goals and reduce traffic congestion.
- Accommodate approximately 17,000 visitors per day in East Yosemite Valley.
- Continue to manage overnight-use capacity through wilderness permits, and reservation systems for lodging and camping.
- Manage day-use capacity for East Yosemite Valley through permits and a reservation system required during peak season.



## Overview of the Alternatives

### Alternative 5 (Preferred): Enhanced Visitor Experience and Essential Riverbank Restoration

The “preferred alternative” is the agency-preferred course of action at the time a draft EIS is released. It represents our attempt to balance the multiple objectives and interests inherent in planning for a national park. For the draft plan, the NPS has identified Alternative 5 as the preferred course of action.



The guiding principles of Alternative 5 would include significant restoration within 100 feet of the river and in meadow and riparian areas, maintaining daily visitation in Yosemite Valley to accommodate peak levels similar to those observed in recent years, reducing unnecessary facilities and services, and converting facilities from administrative use to public use where feasible.

Management actions in Alternative 5 would:

- Restore 203 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Significantly increase the campsite inventory corridorwide (+28%), including the inventory in Yosemite Valley (+37%).
- Minimally increase the lodging inventory corridorwide (less than 1%), including a minor increase in Yosemite Valley lodging (+2%).
- Increase day-use parking spaces in Yosemite Valley (+5%).
- Reduce commercial services.
- Make significant changes to the traffic circulation pattern to meet ecological restoration goals and reduce traffic congestion through infrastructure improvements.
- Accommodate approximately 19,900 visitors per day in East Yosemite Valley.
- Continue to manage overnight-use capacity through wilderness permits and reservation systems for lodging and camping.
- Manage day-use capacity for East Yosemite Valley through traffic diversions and monitoring.

### OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

If implemented as proposed, the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 5) will restore more than 200 acres of meadow and riparian habitat and outlines a program of targeted restoration to reverse site-specific impacts stemming from past patterns of visitor use. Additionally, the removal and redesign of selected facilities subject to flooding and rock-fall hazard will reduce the likelihood of future impacts. A robust monitoring program is a prominent feature of the plan, complete with pre-identified actions to mitigate unanticipated impacts. This program ensures the protection of the priceless attributes of the Merced River corridor and will allow for the evaluation of the success of restoration goals and provide the information needed to adapt management practices as necessary.

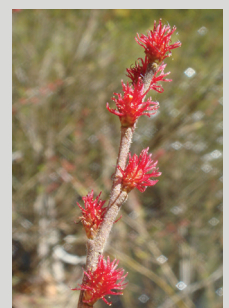
The Preferred Alternative retains the essence of Yosemite, ensuring that the experiences enjoyed by generations of families are sustained over time. Visitors will continue to enjoy the freedom to access Yosemite Valley by private vehicle with increased options for public transit and expanded shuttle bus service. Traffic congestion and crowding will be reduced through organized and efficient parking for day-use visitors. Other actions are designed to reclaim the heart of Yosemite Valley for visitor use and enjoyment and create a “sense of arrival” to the Valley with the redesign of the primary day-use parking area and the removal of industrial and administrative functions. Recommendations of professional traffic engineers will be implemented to improve circulation, reduce congestion and provide for a more relaxed visitor experience.

Overnight accommodations (camping and lodging) will be improved; low-cost camping will be expanded in Yosemite Valley by 37 percent. Some tent cabins in Curry Village will be replaced by hard-sided cabins to provide more opportunities for year-round accommodation. Substandard, temporary, and aging employee housing will be replaced with code-compliant facilities that complement the historic character and scenic quality of Yosemite. Replacement housing will be constructed to LEED Gold or higher performance standards, reducing water and energy consumption.

Finally, the Preferred Alternative ensures that Yosemite will continue to make a strong and positive contribution to local and regional economies, and our projections indicate that visitors will continue to spend over \$380 million annually during their visits to the park. This level of visitor spending will continue to support more than 6,500 jobs within the surrounding four-county region, most prominently in gateway communities.



**Sierra sweet bay (*Myrica hartwegii*) is a rare plant found along the South Fork. The plant blooms in mid-May, as shown below, just as its leaves are beginning to emerge.**



## Overview of the Alternatives

### Alternative 6: Diversified Visitor Experiences and Selective Riverbank Restoration

Guiding principles of Alternative 6 include limited restoration within 100 feet of the river and in meadow and riparian areas, infrastructure improvements to accommodate growth in peak daily visitation in the Yosemite Valley, and expansion of facilities and services for diversified visitor experiences.

Management actions in Alternative 6 would:

- Restore 170 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Significantly increase the campsite inventory corridorwide (+46%), including a major increase in the campsite inventory of Yosemite Valley (+59%).
- Increase the lodging inventory corridorwide (+18%), including an increase in Yosemite Valley (+21%).
- Increase day-use parking for Yosemite Valley (+11%).
- Expand facilities and services to accommodate growth in visitation.
- Reduce traffic congestions and improve traffic circulation through major infrastructure improvements.
- Accommodate approximately 21,800 visitors per day in East Yosemite Valley.
- Continue to manage overnight-use capacity through wilderness quotas and reservation systems for lodging and camping.
- Manage day-use capacity for East Yosemite Valley through traffic diversions and monitoring.



The Merced River Draft Plan would restore the bed and banks of the river to natural conditions, like the section shown here. Restoration actions will improve the free-flowing condition of the river.



Yosemite's scientists study the park's archeological resources. In the Merced River Draft Plan, cultural resources would be protected and enhanced as part of seven cultural outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs).



## Where to Learn More About the Merced River Plan

We hope this guide has served as a useful synopsis of the draft plan and that you are now inspired to learn more about the plan. In the following pages, find more information about the organization of the document and elements of the plan with additional detail. Also, you will find information on how to submit public comment and stay engaged in the plan.

*Chapter 1: The Merced Wild and Scenic River* describes the purpose of the nation's Wild and Scenic Rivers System and what the designation of the Merced River as part of that system means in terms of river planning.

*Chapter 2: The Purpose and Need for the Merced River Plan* describes the purpose and organization of the plan, the major planning issues identified during internal and public scoping, and the inter-relationships with other plans and projects.

*Chapter 3: Wild and Scenic River Corridor Boundaries and Segment Classifications* explains the legal requirements for establishing a river corridor boundary and for classifying its segments. This chapter describes the boundary and segment classifications for the Merced River in Yosemite National Park.

*Chapter 4: Determination Process for Water Resource Projects* explains the legal requirements for protecting the river's free-flowing condition and describes the process that will be used to fulfill that requirement.

*Chapter 5: River Values and Their Management* discusses each river value in detail, including a summary of conditions at the time of designation in 1987 and existing conditions as of 2011. Site-specific actions would be taken to remedy any deficiencies in condition in every alternative. Yosemite is committed to a long-term monitoring program that tracks and ensures the success of these actions.

*Chapter 6: Visitor Use and User Capacity* describes the process used to address the WSRA's user-capacity requirement. The major differences among the plan alternatives (presented in "Alternatives" Chapter 8) have to do with the kinds and amounts of use the river corridor could receive in the future.

*Chapter 7: Facilities and Services Analysis* examines structures and facilities within each segment of the Merced River corridor in terms of their effect on river values. This chapter also examines the feasibility of relocating, removing, or re-designing facilities that cause management concerns with regard to river values.

## 'Merced River Plan / DEIS' Document Organization

### Volume 1

Abstract

Executive Summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Purpose and Need for the Plan

Chapter 3: River Boundaries and Segment Classifications

Chapter 4: Section 7 Determination Process

Chapter 5: River Values and their Management

Chapter 6: Visitor Use and User Capacity

Chapter 7: Facilities and Services Analysis

Chapter 8: Alternatives

- Introduction
- Detailed Description of Alternatives
- Actions Considered but Dismissed
- Cost Comparison
- Comparisons of User Capacities and Alternative Actions
- River Value Analysis

### Volume 2

Chapter 9: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

Chapter 10: Consultation and Coordination

Chapter 11: List of Preparers

Chapter 12: Glossary and Acronyms

Chapter 13: References

Appendices

 Merced River Plan Elements  
(as required by WSRA)

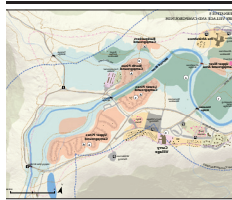
 Draft Environmental Impact Statement  
(as required by NEPA)

## Where to Learn More About the Merced River Plan

*Chapter 8: Alternatives* presents the six alternatives (no action plus five action alternatives) under consideration in the draft plan. The differences among the alternatives vary primarily based on visitor use and user capacity. Many of the actions needed to protect and enhance river values are common to all the action alternatives.

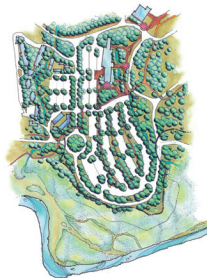
### *Chapter 8: Alternatives Map*

Maps of key locations in the Merced River corridor are provided to orient readers to the planning areas and the context in which the actions and facilities are situated. These key planning areas include Curry Village and Campgrounds; Yosemite Village and Housekeeping Camp; Yosemite Lodge and Camp 4; West Yosemite Valley; El Portal; Wawona; Merced Lake High Sierra Camp.



### *Chapter 8: Conceptual Site Drawings*

Site plan drawings are included for a few key locations in the discussion of the Alternative. These locations include Curry Village; Yosemite Village Day-use Parking Area; Valley Maintenance Yard; and Yosemite Lodge Day-use Parking Area. These drawings are provided to demonstrate where facilities would be removed, relocated or constructed according to actions more fully described by project alternatives. These drawings do not represent a final proposal. More detailed design and construction documents would be developed consistent with the general concept presented here.



### *Chapter 8: River Value Analysis*

At the conclusion of each alternative description, there is an analysis of how each alternative is protective of River Values. Consistent with WSRA, to “protect and enhance the values which cause [the river] to be included in [the Wild and Scenic Rivers] system,” all actions included in each alternative must be protective of river values. This section demonstrates how the actions to address management concerns and considerations in combination with the actions addressing issues and opportunities would be protective of river values.



The Wawona Historic Resources ORV, as part of the Merced River Draft Plan, includes one of the few covered bridges in the region.

*Chapter 9: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences* identifies and describes the natural and sociocultural resources and values that could be affected by the alternatives presented in Chapter 8 and evaluates and compares the potential effects of the alternatives. Chapter 9 looks comprehensively at the components of the human environment that might be affected by the plan and assesses how they might be affected by actions intended to protect and enhance river values.

*Chapter 10: Consultation and Coordination* summarizes all consultation and coordination efforts undertaken for the draft plan to date. It outlines the project scoping history and the much broader public involvement history that extended through every step of the development of the draft plan. It describes specific consultations with the traditionally associated American Indian tribes and the federal, state, and local agencies having jurisdiction or particular interests in the Merced River corridor.



The Merced River Plan aims to improve parking, such as in the Curry Orchard Parking Area, to enhance the visitor experience while protecting river values.



## How to Comment/Stay Involved

### Meeting Schedule

View a schedule of public webinar and workshops at [www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm). As part of its robust outreach efforts in early 2013, the park will present several informational webinars to brief the public on the key elements of the draft plan prior to the start of the public meetings, to be held in the park and in various gateway communities.

### Public Comment

To make an official comment on the draft plan, visit the Merced River Plan Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at [http://parkplanning.nps.gov/mrp\\_deis](http://parkplanning.nps.gov/mrp_deis). Electronic comment submittal through PEPC saves resources and allows for direct entry into the NPS comment analysis system. Alternately, your comments can be emailed to [yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:yose_planning@nps.gov), faxed to 209/379-1294 or mailed to:

Superintendent Yosemite National Park  
Attn: Merced River Plan  
P.O. Box 577  
Yosemite, CA 95389

Your feedback needs to be received before the close of the 90-day comment period. View details at [www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm), including the date the comment period closes.

### Updates

Stay involved and learn of plan updates, including meeting dates, by following the draft plan on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS](http://www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS).

### Online Information

Access information regarding the draft plan online at [www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp-deis.htm). On this park webpage, you can access documents,

graphics, useful web links, and information on public meetings and how to submit official public comment. Online files include an electronic version of the document along with related maps, conceptual site drawings, and outreach materials, including this *Summary Guide*. Web links also offer additional ways you can learn about the draft plan.

### Interactive Map

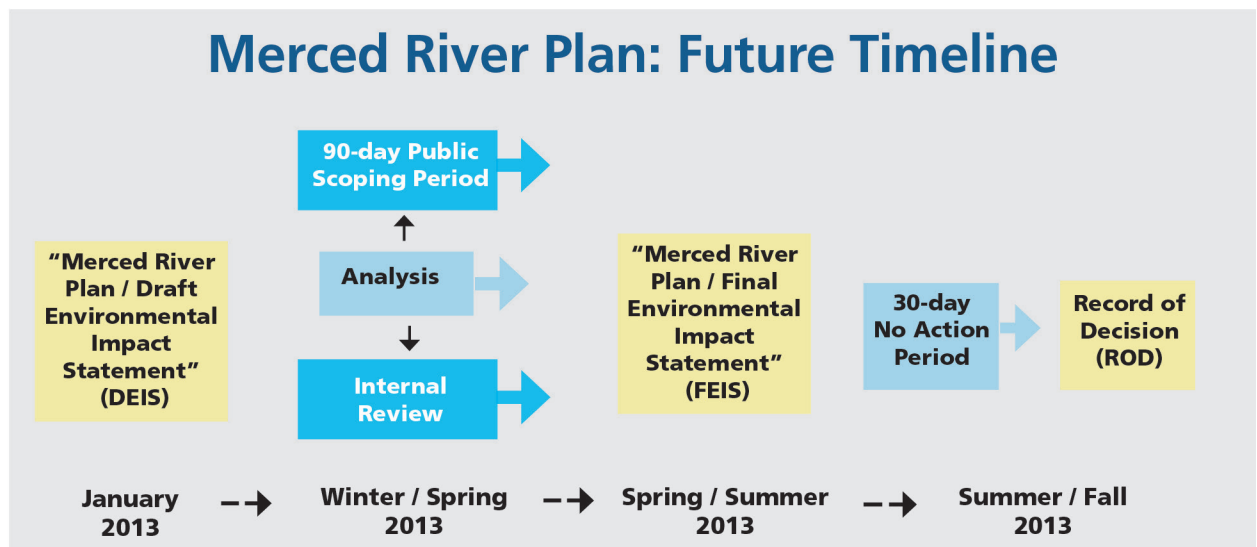
A new interactive web map viewer allows for a rapid, visual comparison of the alternatives in a map-based format. Actions regarding restoration, land use and facility management are shown where they are proposed. Each alternative, including Alternative 5 (Preferred), can be turned on and off for easy comparison of differences in the alternatives. Users can “zoom in” to explore proposed actions for specific planning areas, such as Yosemite Valley, El Portal, and Wawona. Explore the range of alternatives for the draft plan at <http://imgis.nps.gov/yose>.

### Fact Sheets

To help inform the public about the draft plan, fact sheets have been developed that delve deeper into a single topic. These topics include restoration; parking; camping; an overview of the alternatives; and Alternative 5 (Preferred).

### Bibliography

Scientific studies in the draft plan draw from a broad base of professional disciplines to ensure that the park is painting a holistic picture of the current condition of the river and its ORVs. These disciplines include biology, hydrology, geology, social sciences, archaeology, and others. View [www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp\\_research.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp_research.htm) for documents that support the park’s river research and data collection.







Merced Wild and Scenic River  
Draft Comprehensive Management Plan  
and Environmental Impact Statement

Yosemite National Park  
P.O. Box 577  
Yosemite, CA 95389

[www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp.htm)



As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned lands and natural resources. This includes fostering sound use of our land and water resources; protecting our fish, wildlife, and biological diversity; preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places; and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to ensure that their development is in the best interests of all people by encouraging stewardship and citizen participation in their care. The department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.



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