



*“Within National Parks is room—glorious room—  
room in which to find ourselves, in which to think and hope,  
to dream and plan, to rest and resolve.” - Enos Mills*

## PLANNING UPDATE

Volume 31

May 2007

*“Planning for both the  
Merced and Tuolumne  
Wild and Scenic Rivers  
is in full swing, and  
this edition of the  
Planning Update will  
highlight the progress  
being made.”*

### Dear Yosemite Friends,



It is peak summer season in the park, and there is no place more beautiful than Yosemite's spectacular rivers. Planning for both the Merced and Tuolumne Wild and Scenic Rivers is in full swing, and this edition of the *Planning Update* will highlight the progress being made.

The *Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* is well underway for the second season with our park core team and the public working in concert to envision the best way to protect and enhance the river's "Outstandingly Remarkable Values," those river attributes for which Congress deemed it worthy of special protection in 1984. The Tuolumne River planning process is following the same National Park Service planning process as was undertaken for the Merced River. To address the concerns of park advocates who felt the Merced process was difficult to understand and track, we have added a series of hands-on public workshops for the Tuolumne plan designed to make it a more understandable and transparent process. Participants have included several long time park stakeholders who have praised the daylong Saturday sessions. A preliminary look at what the process is yielding will be available soon. I encourage you to read more about this exciting process in this *Planning Update* edition (see page 5).

Meanwhile, we have initiated a new, third version of the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan*, as ordered by the U.S. District Court (see pages 2-4). The plan follows the same transparent and inclusive public involvement process as the Tuolumne Plan. I sincerely hope that all interested members of the public will join us in creating the strongest plans possible for the Merced and Tuolumne Wild and Scenic Rivers.

I and my staff remain committed not only to comply with the law, but to genuinely engage all of you who know about and care for these magnificent rivers. Please help us honor the places and the process by participating.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Tollefson  
Park Superintendent

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## Planning in the Park

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### Plans underway include:

- Tuolumne River and Tuolumne Meadows Plans
- New Merced River Plan/EIS
- Tunnel View Site Plan

### Plans about to commence include:

- A parkwide Comprehensive Transportation Plan/EIS
  - El Portal Design Guidelines
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## Upcoming Document Reviews

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**Reconstructing Critically Eroded Sections of El Portal Road:** Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in June 2007 (*see article, page 3*).

**Tunnel View Overlook Rehabilitation:** Public scoping opens June 2007. Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in Fall 2007.

**Glacier Point Road Rehabilitation:** Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in July 2007.

**Hetch Hetchy Communications System Upgrade Project:** Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in July 2007.

**Hodgdon Meadow Trailer Replacement Project:** Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in late summer 2007.

**Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan:** Public review and comment period on the Environmental Assessment anticipated in fall of 2007 (*see article, page 6*).

**Environmental Education Campus:** Resource studies continuing through summer. Environmental Impact Statement anticipated for public release in winter 2008.



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# PLANNING FOR THE MERCED RIVER

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The National Park Service has the privilege of managing 81 miles of the Merced River, which includes the Main Stem and the South Fork that travels through Yosemite National Park and the El Portal Administrative Site. The Merced is a federally designated Wild and Scenic River protected by the provisions of the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Seventy-five percent of the Merced River in National Park Service jurisdiction is located in designated Wilderness, but most people experience the Merced in Yosemite Valley which, as a World Heritage Site, attracts millions of people from around the globe to gaze at the striking granite walls and thundering waterfalls each year. The focus of the agency's planning effort for the Merced River strives to strike a balance between access and use of the river while protecting and enhancing the "values" that made the river worthy of protection. These are known as Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) according to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. To protect the ORVs, a plan for the Merced River will be created to help guide future land managers in determining appropriate actions and uses along the river.

Previous plans were developed for the Merced River in 2000 and again in 2005. However, due to ongoing litigation, the park was mandated by the US District Court to complete a new plan (*see page 4*). This new planning process will take approximately 33 months, with a final Record of Decision anticipated in September 2009. While the agency is embarking on a new planning process, the previous court decision on the 2005 plan is being appealed. If the appeal is decided in favor of the 2005 Merced River Plan, the National Park Service will determine whether to continue moving forward with this new planning process.

Throughout the planning process, consider the following types of questions to help us understand what you think should help shape a vision for the Merced River:

- *What kind of natural environment do you want to be immersed in while spending time along the river? How would you like to see the culture and history of Yosemite preserved and shared?*
- *What kinds of experiences should people have opportunities for in different places along the river? Where would you expect to find solitude and where would it be acceptable or desirable to encounter other visitors, and why?*

While past scoping comments continue to shape our understanding, the National Park Service is asking for your input in its new planning effort. Share your passion for the place by helping to shape its future.

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# Merced River Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan PUBLIC SCOPING NEWS

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The National Park Service is hosting a series of public scoping meetings that began at the Open House on March 30, 2007. Additional meetings will be held in Mariposa on **Wednesday, May 16** (4-8pm at the Masonic Hall on 5154 Jones Street), San Francisco on **Thursday, May 17** (4-8pm at Fort Mason, 1st Floor Conference Room, Building 201; Bay and Franklin Streets), and at the Open House on **Wednesday, May 30** (1-5pm in the Yosemite Valley Auditorium). The public scoping period for the new Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (MRP/EIS) will run until June 9, 2007. A new public scoping report will be added to the reports generated during the previous two efforts. After scoping, we will be defining new classifications, boundaries, user capacity management strategies and management zones for this new Merced River Plan.

The National Park Service welcomes all ideas and concerns regarding this planning effort. Comments submitted for the two previous MRP/EIS efforts will be incorporated into this new process. If you have additional comments, you can submit them to us until June 9, 2007 by any of the methods listed below:

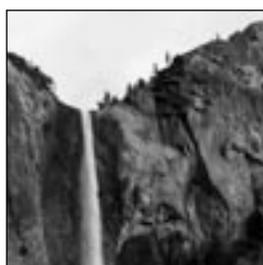
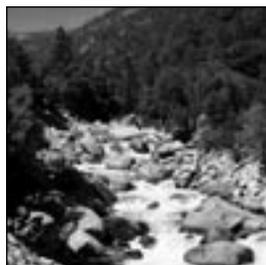
**In person** at public meetings

**Fax:** (209) 379-1294

**Email:** [yose\\_planning@nps.gov](mailto:yose_planning@nps.gov)

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

The *Participant Guide: Planning For The Merced River* can be found at [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/newmrp](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/newmrp) for more detailed information. For information on this and other planning efforts in Yosemite National Park go to [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning).



## Reconstructing Critically Eroded Sections on El Portal Road

Park staff is working on a plan to repair a 1350 ft. section of the El Portal Road just east of the Big Oak Flat Road intersection. This section of road is immediately adjacent to and being undercut by the Merced Wild and Scenic River. As a result, its dry-laid walls are failing. The walls were severely damaged by the 1997 flood and have been spot repaired several times over the past 10 years. In spite of these repairs the road continues to be in jeopardy of collapse, especially during periods of high run-off. An Environmental Assessment outlining the proposed project is expected to be released in the summer of 2007, when the public will have an opportunity to review and comment on it. Upon project approval, a construction contract is anticipated to be awarded by the end of September 2007 to allow work to occur during the periods of low river flows in the fall. To accommodate visitors and employees in the midst of construction, one lane will be open to controlled traffic during the day, weekends, and holidays. During weeknights, the road will be closed to traffic with one exit convoy at approximately 11pm.



Eroded sections of El Portal Road

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# SETTING NATIONWIDE PRECEDENTS IN YOSEMITE



Since 1997, Yosemite has been involved in ongoing legal challenges regarding planning for the Merced River Plan. In July of 2006, the US District Court declared the second version of the plan invalid and ordered a new Merced River Plan to be completed; the case is currently under appeal by the Department of Justice. The Court's primary issue is "user capacity," which has potentially far-reaching implications not only for Yosemite, but for all National Park Service, Wild and Scenic River managers, and federal land management agencies as a whole.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE WITH THIS RULING?

Some of the issues with the Merced River Plan reach far beyond Yosemite Valley. The Court's ruling determined that the park needs to limit the number of people allowed in the river corridor (especially Yosemite Valley). The ruling sets a precedent that contradicts the preponderance of research and scientific thinking, and may be used to invalidate management plans across the National Park Service, the US Forest Service and many other agencies. The National Park Service remains committed to a conditions-based adaptive management user capacity approach supported by the scientific community.

## MAINTAINING OBJECTIVITY

Yosemite National Park is also committed to a planning process that includes all stakeholders and fully examines

alternatives. Much has been learned through the past Merced River planning efforts and the dialogue with the public. In the new Merced River planning process as well as for the Tuolumne River Plan, we will evaluate the effectiveness and analyze impacts of a variety of management methods for user capacity, including day-use and overnight quotas (and their various implementation methods, such as reservation systems), as well as the types of adaptive management strategies commonly employed in the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, and along other Wild and Scenic Rivers. All of these methods will be weighed against the quality of the visitor experience they provide while guaranteeing protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the river. The goals of the National Park Service are to meet the legal mandates of the court while protecting the natural and cultural features and providing fair and equal access to all.

**To learn about the Merced River Plan litigation, go to [www.nps.gov/yose/planning/litigation](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning/litigation)**

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## COMPREHENSIVE TRANSPORTATION PLAN

Yosemite is about to commence a process to develop a parkwide Comprehensive Transportation Plan. Many past park plans have studied transportation, both parkwide and in specific areas such as Yosemite Valley. Several areas, such as the Wawona and Tioga Road corridors, have not been examined since the 1980 General Management Plan (GMP). Previous plans defined problems and solutions to deal with visitation and demographic projections that reflected trends documented at that time.

Since then the park has been updating transportation and visitor information through a grant from the Federal Transit Administration. Data collected and trends derived indicate that many previous assumptions about visitation growth, patterns, and demographics do not match what has actually occurred. A fresh look at Yosemite's transportation systems and solutions is

warranted. Through this plan, park planners, social and natural scientists, and transportation managers will analyze the transportation and visitor data to understand how the system is currently functioning and identify where the problems are. They will compile all past plans to review the decisions of record regarding visitor experience, access, and resources conditions, especially where they are related to transportation. Then they will conduct public scoping to share this analysis, and to hear from the public reactions to this new information and ideas about transportation in Yosemite. This plan will study transportation solutions for the park, and will analyze impacts of those solutions beyond park boundaries. It will comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and, if necessary, amend transportation elements of the past plans.

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# TUOLUMNE RIVER PLAN UPDATE

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## PUBLIC WORKSHOPS:

This spring, Yosemite held its first-ever *Planner For A Day* public workshops for the Tuolumne River Plan. The purpose of this interactive workshop series was to provide the public with additional opportunities to engage in the planning process while the plan is being developed. From February to April, a dedicated group of interested members of the public, as well as representatives from various organizations, turned out to help the National Park Service approach some of the earliest steps in developing the Tuolumne River Plan.

One workshop participant asked, “Are these sessions intended to show us what it’s like to be planners, or will this information actually be used in the plan?” The answer is BOTH. The work produced at these public events has helped inform the NPS planning team. From studying the broad range of public scoping comments and guiding legal mandates, to envisioning the resource and visitor experience conditions desired for the Tuolumne

River corridor, participants engaged in some of the same tasks undertaken by the NPS planning team.

The workshop series culminated in a session dedicated to giving participants—working in teams—an opportunity to create their own management concepts for the river. NPS planning team members then considered these this spring as they began developing a range of draft alternatives for the Tuolumne River Plan.

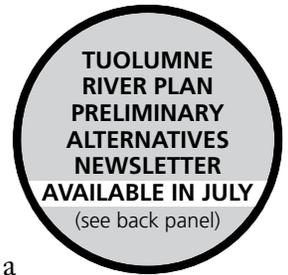
## ALTERNATIVES NEWSLETTER:

But the effort does not stop here. In July, the NPS will present for public comment a newsletter containing preliminary alternatives for the Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan. This newsletter will contain a range of emerging concepts for future management of the Tuolumne River corridor. It is intended to provide the public with an opportunity to review and comment on preliminary alternatives early in the plan’s development. Unlike the draft plan and environmental impact statement

(to be released in 2009), this document will not contain environmental analysis nor will it identify a

preferred alternative. Rather, it will present a description of the future conditions desired for the river corridor, along with management approaches for achieving these goals. In the fall, public comments received will be considered by the planning team during the ongoing creation of the draft Tuolumne River Plan.

Written comments will be accepted throughout the summer. Future announcements about the newsletter will be made through news releases, as well as on the park’s website and the Yosemite Electronic Newsletter. To receive a copy of the preliminary alternatives newsletter, return the form on the back of this newsletter. For more information on this planning effort, visit online at [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/trp](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning/trp).



**Working Together:** During spring public workshops, participants worked in groups to produce results for consideration by the NPS planning team in the development of the Tuolumne River Plan.

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## Tuolumne Meadows Plan Scoping Re-opens this Summer

When the Tuolumne River Plan preliminary alternative concepts are released for public comment this summer, the public will be asked to consider their implications for the Tuolumne Meadows Plan. The Tuolumne Meadows Plan will make site-specific decisions relating to uses and facilities in Tuolumne Meadows, drawing from the guidance of the Tuolumne River Plan. Scoping comments were received last summer, and those are being factored into the preliminary Tuolumne River Plan management options. But if new ideas emerge in light of these preliminary concepts for the river, additional Tuolumne Meadows Plan comments will be welcomed.

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# Grand Opening of the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center Exhibit Hall

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On April 13, Yosemite National Park and The Yosemite Fund proudly presented to park visitors, staff, and partners the new Yosemite Valley Visitor Center Exhibit Hall. Through a variety of experiences, exhibit hall visitors are encouraged to explore Yosemite with new understanding and inspiration—the exhibits offer a range of diverse learning opportunities, appealing to those who desire a quick overview of Yosemite and those who want to linger and study more.

The exhibits take people on an immersive, semi-chronological journey to learn how the landscape was formed, how wildlife adapts, how humans have affected (and been affected by) Yosemite, and how the national park continues to evolve. The five main exhibit areas explore interconnections between geological, hydrological, biological, and cultural processes over millions of years, while challenging people to consider their role in Yosemite today. Visitors travel through the main passageway where life-sized exhibit elements, animations, painted murals, countless photographs, and a variety of art convey a general sense about each aspect of the Yosemite story. Major exhibit features are integrated with text, recordings, and tactile components, enabling visitors to engage their sense of hearing, touch, and sight to gain more in-depth information about the subject matter.

The exhibit hall is located inside the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center and is open daily during visitor center hours. See the *Yosemite Today* newsletter for operating hours and come experience the stories behind the Yosemite scenes.

This \$1.2 million renovation of over 40-year-old exhibits was funded jointly by the National Park Service with recreation fee money, and The Yosemite Fund from donor contributions and the State of California Specialty Yosemite License Plates.

## Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan

Are you one of those invaluable Yosemite stewards who can remember when the yellow star-thistle patch above the elementary school in El Portal was the size of a baseball field? In a short time, this yellow star-thistle patch grew to cover over 110 acres. The good news is that the efforts of the park's restoration crew and the sweat of many park volunteers have resulted in a steady decrease in the abundance of this noxious weed. Even better news is that Yosemite is taking steps to protect Yosemite from the threat of future invasive plant invasion with the upcoming release of the Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan Environmental Assessment. Using input from earlier public meetings and public scoping, the plan will present four alternatives to eradicate (or at least control) invasive plant species before they become a daunting challenge; prevent new invasions; restore and maintain healthy ecosystems; enhance visitor experiences; and inform park staff, partners, and visitors. Come to the monthly Open House or visit [www.nps.gov/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/yose/planning) for more information. The plan is anticipated to be released in fall of 2007.



Photo by Kenny Karst

Ribbon cutting ceremony on April 13, 2007



Visitor Center Exhibits



Photo by Bethany Gediman

Exploring the exhibits

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# El Portal Design Guidelines

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El Portal is a unique community located deep in the Merced River canyon at the western park boundary. The town of El Portal is located on land owned by the National Park Service and is inhabited by a few hundred National Park Service, concessioner, Yosemite Institute, Yosemite Association, Yosemite artists, and Mariposa County School District employees and their families.

Initially settled by the American Indians thousands of years ago, the community of El Portal has developed organically since the late 1800s when James Hennessey began farming in the present-day trailer court, and when Johnny Wilson homesteaded south of the Merced River near the present-day Yosemite View Lodge. At the turn of the 19th Century, the Yosemite Valley Railroad was built from Merced to El Portal, allowing tourists comfortable passage to Yosemite. During this era, El Portal grew to accommodate railroad workers, inn-keepers, stage-coach drivers, and their families. Small homes, a store, a school, and a large hotel were built along the south-facing slopes of Old El Portal—many of which remain today. In addition to bringing tourists to Yosemite, the railroad encouraged industry such as logging and mining to move into El Portal. Barium mining took off in the early 1900s and continued into the middle of the century. Miners developed areas of El Portal like Rancheria and Abbieville; houses, mining adits, and an assay office remain in El Portal from this era.

In 1958, the National Park Service purchased the land encompassing the town of El Portal from the El Portal Mining Company with the intent of using the land to house more employees and to move offices and operations out of Yosemite Valley to El Portal. Since that time, several houses, apartment complexes, an elementary school, a waste-water treatment plant, and NPS administrative offices have been built in El Portal. Today, many of the homes—especially the historic ones that date to the mining and railroad era—are owned by families or park partners affiliated with Yosemite while the land on which they sit is owned by the NPS. Many other houses and apartments are owned and operated by the NPS.

The NPS is currently initiating the El Portal Design Guidelines project with the El Portal community. Together they will identify the character-defining elements of the existing unique design style throughout El Portal in order to perpetuate those that are dear to the community. The guidelines will provide direction for future town planning efforts regarding appropriate size, spatial organization, massing of structures, and architectural style throughout the town. The NPS is regularly meeting with the El Portal Town Planning Advisory Group, and will begin working with the broader El Portal community in the upcoming months. The goal of the project is to create a useful and relevant set of guidelines that reflect the character of El Portal, through an open exchange between the community and the NPS.



El Portal Market is a community hub as well as the only store in El Portal.

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## Designing begins for Tunnel View Overlook Rehabilitation Project

The Tunnel View scenic overlook is a historic site located adjacent to Wawona Road. This overlook affords expansive views of Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, Bridalveil Falls, and Half Dome that have captured the awe of visitors for 75 years. The purpose of the Tunnel View Overlook Rehabilitation Project is to remedy traffic safety issues, to correct drainage deficiencies, to provide clear circulation patterns for pedestrians and vehicles, to enhance and maintain viewing opportunities, to provide accessibility to viewing areas for visitors with disabilities, to correct safety problems associated with the Inspiration Point trailhead, and to address sanitation issues, while maintaining the naturalistic, rustic character and integrity of this historic site. The project will be presented at the Yosemite Open Houses held monthly in Yosemite Valley. Design and the environmental assessment will occur throughout the rest of 2007.

Construction is expected to occur 2008.

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## STAY INVOLVED!

Copies of planning documents are available on the park's website at [www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yose/planning). You can also subscribe to the electronic newsletter by signing up online—this e-newsletter announces when new documents are available. Please help the National Park Service economize by accessing documents online when possible. If you would like to receive a copy of planning documents for review, please check the boxes that apply. If you have already requested one of these documents, you do not need to submit another request.

- Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan Preliminary Alternative Concepts Newsletter  Send me the newsletter
- Parkwide Invasive Plant Management Plan  CD  Hard Copy
- Reconstructing Critically Eroded Sections on El Portal Road  CD  Hard Copy
- Glacier Point Road Rehabilitation  CD  Hard Copy
- Hetch Hetchy Communications System Upgrade Project  CD  Hard Copy
- Hodgdon Meadow Trailer Replacement Project  CD  Hard Copy
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