

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Merced Wild and Scenic River originates at the crest of the Sierra Nevada in Yosemite National Park, descending almost 10,000 feet on its 81-mile journey through the park and the El Portal Administrative Site. The U.S. Congress designated the Merced River in Yosemite as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in 1987 (Public Law 100-149). As the Merced Wild and Scenic River leaves National Park Service jurisdiction, the remaining 41 miles are managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires comprehensive planning for a Wild and Scenic River to provide for the protection of the river's free-flowing condition, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values, collectively referred to as "river values." This *Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (Final Merced River Plan/EIS)* describes how the National Park Service will fulfill this mandate. The plan accomplishes the following:

- Establishes the boundaries and segment classifications (wild, scenic, or recreational) of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires federal agencies to establish legal boundaries for each federally-administered river in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. **Chapter 3** explains the legal requirements for establishing a river corridor boundary and classifying its segments. The chapter defines the river corridor boundary for the Merced River in Yosemite National Park and describes the eight segments within the corridor and their classifications.
- Establishes a formal process for protecting the river's free-flowing condition, in keeping with WSRA Section 7. Section 7 is a key provision of WSRA that restricts water resources projects, projects within the bed and banks of the Merced River, or projects that affect the river's free-flowing condition. **Chapter 4** explains the legal requirements for protecting the river's free-flowing condition and describes the process that will be used to fulfill that requirement.
- Refines descriptions of the river's outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs), which are the river-related rare, unique, or exemplary characteristics that make the river worthy of inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The plan identifies 20 outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs) for the Merced River. **Chapter 5** provides an orientation to the river values and the concepts of management standards, adverse impact, and degradation.
- Documents the condition of river values, including water quality, free-flowing condition, and outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs), and establishes a management program to protect and enhance these values. **Chapter 5** discusses each river value in detail, including a summary of its current condition, associated management concerns, and specific actions needed for its protection. The chapter describes in detail the monitoring program the NPS will use to ensure that all river values remain protected and enhanced.
- Establishes a user-capacity program that addresses the kinds and amounts of public use that the river corridor can sustain while protecting and enhancing the river's outstandingly remarkable values. Carrying capacity, a term used interchangeably with user capacity, is defined as "the

quantity of recreation use which an area can sustain without adverse impact on the outstandingly remarkable values and free-flowing character of the river area, the quality of recreation experience, and public health and safety.”¹ **Chapter 6** describes how key components of the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* work together to meet the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requirement to address user capacities when preparing a comprehensive river management plan.

- Defines the size and location of the facilities (both current and future) needed to provide for public use and enjoyment of the river resource, consistent with the protection and enhancement of river values. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires that management plans prepared for rivers designated under the act will address the “development of lands and facilities” in the river area. WSRA and its implementing guidelines provide direction on the types of facilities that may be maintained within a river area. **Chapter 7** describes how the information provided in Chapter 5 was used to evaluate the existing and proposed major public use facilities in the river corridor. It also identifies the facilities that will be removed or relocated under each alternative.

Other Applicable Laws and Policies

In addition to complying with the WSRA requirements outlined above, the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* complies with all other applicable statutes and management policies. The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* documents the results of 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.

DOCUMENT OVERVIEW

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* is organized into two volumes and supported by 20 appendices. Volume 1 contains Chapters 1-8, which provide the analytical framework for the alternatives as well as a detailed description of each alternative. Chapters 1–3 describe the Merced Wild and Scenic River, discuss the purpose and need for comprehensive planning under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and define the boundaries and segments of the Merced Wild and Scenic River. Chapter 4 describes the Section 7 determination process. Chapter 5 documents river value conditions and explains the monitoring and management program that will ensure they remain protected. Chapter 6 explains how user capacities were established and how they will be managed. Chapter 7 includes an assessment of all facilities and services in order to determine their necessity and potential impact to river values. Chapter 8 describes six alternatives (five action alternatives and one “No Action” alternative). Volume 2 contains Chapters 9-13. Chapter 9 discloses the environmental consequences associated with each alternative. Chapter 10 summarizes the extensive consultation and coordination efforts conducted for the plan. Chapters 11–13 provide a list of preparers, a glossary and list of acronyms, and references. Appendices A-T provide additional supporting analyses for the actions proposed in the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*.

Purpose and Need for the Merced River Plan

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires federal agencies to describe the purpose and need for agency actions. The purpose and need for the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* is to preserve the Merced River in free-flowing condition and to protect the river’s water quality and outstandingly remarkable values for the

¹ *National Wild and Scenic Rivers System: Final Revised Guidelines for Eligibility, Classification and Management of River Areas* (Secretarial Guidelines)

benefit of present and future generations. **Chapter 2** describes the purpose and need for the plan, the legal and policy framework, the major planning issues identified during internal and public scoping, and the relationship of this plan to other plans and projects.

Alternatives

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) also requires federal agencies to rigorously explore a range of reasonable alternatives when planning for a major federal action. **Chapter 8** presents the six alternatives considered in the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*. All of the action alternatives meet the mandates of the legal and policy framework for the plan.

Alternative 1 (No Action) represents a continuation of current management practices and provides a baseline from which to compare the action alternatives. Alternatives 2-6 feature a wide range of visitation levels, desired visitor experiences, and restoration objectives based on public feedback received throughout the planning process. Across the alternatives, peak visitation for Yosemite Valley ranges from a low of 13,200 people per day (Alternative 3) to a high of 21,800 people per day (Alternative 6). Alternatives 2 and 3 explored a Yosemite with a smaller development footprint and fewer visitor services, resulting in a more self-reliant visitor experience. Alternative 4 examined a Yosemite with a smaller number of lodging units and a significant increase in camping opportunities. Alternative 5 (Preferred) proposes essential restoration within 100 feet of the river, moderate increases in camping, and visitation at levels seen in recent years. A description of Alternative 5 (Preferred) and how it has changed in response to public and agency comment is included in subsequent sections. Alternative 6 explored expanding visitor services to support future increases in visitation. Complete descriptions of the alternatives are provided in Chapter 8.

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

“Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences” (**Chapter 9**) identifies and describes the natural and cultural resources and values potentially affected by the alternatives presented in Chapter 8 and evaluates the impacts of each alternative in comparison to the No Action Alternative. Chapter 9 examines the environmental consequences associated with implementing each of the alternatives.

Consultation and Coordination

Throughout the Merced River planning process, an extensive effort was made to involve professionals from all aspects of river and park management, and was done so in consultation with traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups, elected officials, agency partners, local communities, park visitors, and private citizens. **Chapter 10** summarizes the consultation and coordination efforts undertaken for the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*. The plan was developed in accordance with the NEPA implementing regulations issued by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), which require diligence in involving any interested or affected members of the public in the planning process (40 CFR 1508.22). Compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was completed on a parallel track, using the NHPA Section 106 review process to coordinate the evaluation of impacts to cultural resources. The final plan represents a strong commitment to public engagement; the alternatives and analyses included in the plan have been shaped by approximately 30,000 public comments, as well as by significant consultation with traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups, agency partners, and other key stakeholders.

ALTERNATIVE 5 (PREFERRED) OVERVIEW

Enhanced Visitor Experience and Essential River Bank Restoration

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* proposes actions that will improve the visitor experience in the park. Alternative 5 (Preferred) proposes to accommodate peak visitation at a level similar to recent years—approximately 20,100 people per day in East Yosemite Valley. Visitors to Yosemite Valley will see marked improvements in circulation, parking availability, and traffic flow. Coupled with enhancements to meadows, improvements to river access, and extensive riverbank restoration, the visitor experience would be significantly improved. Visitors to Yosemite Village will experience an enhanced “sense of arrival” to the heart of Yosemite Valley, as the primary day-use parking area would be fully integrated with pathways to visitor services, restrooms, and food service. Families will enjoy expanded camping opportunities in East Yosemite Valley, with new walk-in, drive-in, and group camping sites provided at several locations. Recreational activities such as rafting, bicycling, and ice skating will continue, with rental facilities and services provided at locations outside the river corridor. Boaters would be able to float new and challenging river reaches, framed by views of El Capitan and Half Dome.

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* improves the visitor experience while ensuring that the river and Yosemite National Park are “protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”² Chapter 8 outlines a number of actions common to all alternatives that will protect and enhance river values. Such actions include restoration of riparian areas, removal of riverbank riprap, relocation of camping and parking areas away from the river, restoration of meadow areas, and the removal of abandoned infrastructure in the river corridor. Collectively, the actions proposed in Alternative 5 (Preferred) will enhance river values by restoring 189 acres of habitat, mostly in meadow and riparian areas. Restored riparian and meadow habitats will protect water quality and enhance the interconnected river values, both natural and cultural, of the Merced River. Alternative 5 (Preferred) is the “environmentally preferred” alternative for the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*.

Proposed actions in Alternative 5 (Preferred) would:

- Restore 189 acres of meadow and riparian habitat.
- Significantly increase the campsite inventory in all river segments (+36%) and in Yosemite Valley (+37%).
- Slightly increase available lodging corridorwide (+3%) and in Yosemite Valley (+5%).
- Increase parking for Yosemite Valley day use (+8%).
- Make significant changes to the traffic circulation pattern in Yosemite Valley to meet ecological restoration goals while reducing traffic congestion.
- Establish a user capacity of 18,710 people at one time for Yosemite Valley, with peak visitation estimated at 20,100 visitors per day.
- Manage user capacity for East Yosemite Valley by rerouting traffic at the El Capitan Traffic Diversion prior to reaching established limits.

² 16 U.S.C. Section 1271(b)

SUMMARY OF CHANGES BETWEEN DRAFT AND FINAL PLAN

The *Final Merced River Plan/EIS* has been shaped by coordination and consultation with members of the public, traditionally associated American Indian tribes and groups, agency partners, and other stakeholders. Many of the changes between the draft and final plans were the direct result of comments raised during public meetings or consultation efforts. This collaboration has produced a final plan that will improve visitor experience and better protect the Merced River's unique values.

Alternative 5 (Preferred), as presented in the *Final Merced River Plan/EIS*, includes several changes made in response to public comment and consultation. New development previously proposed for West Yosemite Valley has been eliminated, bicycle and raft rentals are relocated rather than removed, and proposed changes to lodging at Curry Village have been revised to better preserve historic resources. The primary changes to the draft preferred alternative are as follows:

- Increase the number of campsites proposed for Upper and Lower River Campgrounds to provide a total of 72 sites (60 walk-in, 10 auto sites, and two group sites).
- Increase total number of lodging units at Curry Village to 482 to account for units recently relocated from the rock-fall hazard zone.
- Relocate the Curry Village ice skating rink from within the river corridor to its original 1929 location at the south end of the Curry Overnight Parking area.
- Retain bicycle rentals in Yosemite Valley by moving the Curry Village and Yosemite Lodge rental facilities to locations outside of the river corridor.
- Provide raft rentals at a location outside of the river corridor.
- Eliminate the 100 parking spaces originally proposed for West Valley and increase the size of the El Portal Remote Parking Area to 300 spaces. Provide shuttle service from the El Portal parking lot to Yosemite Valley.
- Eliminate the Eagle Creek Campground originally proposed for West Valley.
- Eliminate the proposed 164-bed dormitory at the Huff House temporary employee housing area; retain the historic Huff House and 10 canvas tent cabins; add employee housing to locations outside the river corridor in Yosemite Valley and El Portal.
- Reduce the size of the Yosemite Village Day-use Parking Area to provide 750 parking spaces (from the 850 originally proposed) and provide 189 day-use parking spaces at the Curry Village Day-use Parking Area (the site of Huff House temporary employee housing).
- Retain Sugar Pine Bridge. Conduct further hydrologic impact study to determine the effects of the bridge on the river's alluvial nature. Consideration of bridge removal would involve tiered NEPA compliance and Section 106 Consultation.
- Remove Superintendent's House (Residence 1) and Garage.
- Retain the Ahwahnee and Yosemite Lodge swimming pools.
- Retain 50 historic canvas tents and 14 non-historic cabin-without-bath units at Boys Town and construct 52 new hard-sided cabin-with-bath units.
- Retain the Housekeeping Camp Store.

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