

1. THE MERCED WILD AND SCENIC RIVER

The U.S. Congress designated the Merced River in Yosemite National Park as a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in 1987 (Public Law 100-149). This action amended the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) (16 USC 1271), which states:

“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 protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

The Merced River (Figure 1-1) originates in Yosemite at the crest of the Sierra Nevada and descends almost 10,000 feet in elevation on its 81-mile journey through the park. The river has been central to this dramatic landscape for tens of thousands of years, and it continues to shape riparian and meadow communities and support a diverse suite of wildlife. The river was home to American Indians for millennia, and cultural traditions associated with the river continue to the present day. The Merced River is also a focus for millions of Yosemite visitors who enjoy opportunities for recreation, education, reflection, and inspiration in the sublime beauty of the river corridor.

Figure 1-1: Merced Wild and Scenic River Overview Map



The National Park Service (NPS) is the managing agency for the portions of the Merced Wild and Scenic River in Yosemite and the El Portal Administrative Site. As part of this responsibility, the NPS must develop a Wild and Scenic River comprehensive management plan to guide long-term management and public use in the river corridor. The NPS will develop the plan in accordance with the mandates of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and document the process with an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and subsequent Record of Decision. This document encompasses the draft comprehensive river management plan and associated Draft EIS, collectively referred to as the *Merced River Plan/Draft Environmental Impact Statement*. The NPS intends to release a final EIS in summer 2013.

The *Merced River Plan/DEIS* addresses the required elements of WSRA while complying with the planning processes required by NEPA, the National Historic Preservation Act, and other legal mandates that govern decision-making and planning in the NPS. The NPS expects the plan to have a lifespan of at least 20 years. The plan also fulfills public review requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act.

THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT

Congress established WSRA to counterbalance decades of dam building and river-related development by mandating the protection of some outstanding rivers in their natural, free-flowing state. A *Wild and Scenic River* has “outstandingly remarkable values” (ORVs) that make it worthy of special protection for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. Federal land managers must protect and enhance the values for which a river was designated as a Wild and Scenic River. Today, WSRA protects a select amount—12,600 miles (or less than ¼ of 1%)—of U.S. rivers and creeks as units of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Two Wild and Scenic rivers are located within Yosemite: the Merced River (designated in 1987) and the Tuolumne River (designated in 1984). The Merced River is one of 23 Wild and Scenic Rivers in California and one of six Wild and Scenic Rivers on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada.

REGIONAL SETTING

Within the Sierra Nevada range of California, the Merced River is one of 15 major river systems. Originating in Yosemite’s alpine peaks, the Merced River flows west for 145 miles to its confluence with the San Joaquin River outside the park in the Central Valley of California, encompassing a drainage basin of 1,700 square miles. The first 122 miles of the Merced River are designated as Wild and Scenic; the NPS manages 81 miles of the river through Yosemite and El Portal, including both the Merced River’s main stem and the South Fork Merced River. Within Yosemite, the river reaches contain some of the world’s most-admired scenery, including grand waterfalls and large, mid-elevation meadows. As the Merced River flows outside Yosemite’s western boundary, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manage the next 41 miles of the Wild and Scenic River (Public Law 102-432). The remaining 23 miles of the Merced River below Lake McClure and the New Exchequer Dam, located in the Central Valley, do not have Wild and Scenic River status.

The headwaters of the main stem of the Merced River originate in Yosemite in several watersheds: the Lyell Fork, Triple Peak Fork, Merced Peak Fork, and Red Peak Fork. These watersheds are at the far eastern side of the Merced River watershed, with the Tuolumne, Mono, and San Joaquin River watersheds to the north, east, and south. From its headwaters, the main stem of the Merced River flows freely through a wilderness 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 gradient lessens, the

Merced River meanders through the rich meadow and riparian habitat of Yosemite Valley. At the west end of Yosemite Valley the 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 El Portal on its journey through the Sierra Nevada foothills to the Central Valley of California.

The South Fork Merced River originates at the Sierra crest from the southwestern slopes of Triple Divide Peak and the west facing slopes of Gale Peak and Sing Peak. The South Fork Merced River flows southwest through Yosemite Wilderness (south of the Clark Range) and the community of Wawona. The South Fork Merced River exits the park less than a mile below the Wawona Campground, and then flows through the Sierra National Forest to the confluence of the main stem of the Merced River west of El Portal.

The Merced River's main stem and the South Fork Merced River will be collectively referred to as the Merced River in this document from this point.

GOALS OF THE MERCED RIVER PLAN

The 1980 *General Management Plan* for Yosemite National Park provides long-range management direction for Yosemite. The *Merced River Plan* will amend parts of the *General Management Plan* related to the Merced River corridor, as directed in the 1987 legislation designating the Merced River as a component of the National Wild and Scenic River System. In this legislation, Congress directed that:

“appropriate revisions to the general management plan for the park, and the boundaries, classification, and development plans for such portions need not be published in the Federal Register. Such revisions to the general management plan for the park shall assure that no development or use of park lands shall be undertaken that is inconsistent with the designation of such river segments (16 U.S.C. Section 1274 (a)(62)(A)).”

Appendix A summarizes the actions in the *Merced River Plan/DEIS* that would amend the *General Management Plan*.

The overall goal of the *Merced River Plan/DEIS* is to provide for public recreation and resource use while protecting and enhancing the values for which the Merced River was designated a Wild and Scenic River. The planning team developed goals that are more specific for the *Merced River Plan/DEIS* after analysis of public scoping comments. These specific goals of the *Merced River Plan/DEIS* are to:

- ***Protect and Enhance Ecological and Natural Resource River Values:*** Promote the ability of the Merced River to shape the landscape by reducing impediments to free flow, improving geologic/hydrologic processes, restoring floodplains and meadows, and protecting water quality.
- ***Provide Opportunities for Direct Connection to River Values:*** Support opportunities for people to experience and develop direct connections to the Merced River and its unique values as a place of cultural association, education, recreation, reflection, and inspiration.
- ***Institute a Visitor-Use Management Program:*** Institute a visitor-use management program that provides for high-quality, resource-related recreational opportunities in the river corridor while protecting and enhancing natural and cultural river values today and into the future.
- ***Determine Land Uses and Associated Developments:*** Provide clear direction on land uses and associated developments in the river corridor, allowing for the infrastructure necessary to support the protection and enhancement of river values.

Figure 1-2: MRP / DEIS Organization

'Merced River Plan / DEIS' Document Organization	
Volume 1	
Abstract Executive Summary Chapter 1: Introduction Chapter 2: Purpose and Need for the Plan <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 5px 0;"> 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 </div> Chapter 8: Alternatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> Merced River Plan Elements (as required by WSRA)	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 20px; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"></div> Draft Environmental Impact Statement (as required by NEPA)

THIS DOCUMENT'S ORGANIZATION

The *Merced River Plan/DEIS* is a two-volume set, with appendices provided digitally or online at <http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/mrp.htm>. Figure 1-2 displays the organization of the plan and the sections that comprise the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan / Draft Environmental Impact Statement*.

'Merced River Plan / DEIS' Appendix Organization	
Appendices in Volume 2	
Appendix A: Actions that Amend the 'General Management Plan' Appendix B: Cumulative Actions Appendix C: Mitigation Measures Appendix D: Draft Floodplain Statement of Findings Appendix E: Proposed Restoration Actions Appendix F: Acoustical Measurement Locations Appendix G: On-road Vehicle Criteria Pollutant and GHG Emission Estimates Appendix H: Scenic Vista Management Appendix I: Yosemite Valley Historic District Resources Appendix J: NHPA Assessment of Effect for Site-specific Actions Appendix K: Management Considerations and Actions Appendix L: Determination of Extent Necessary Appendix M: Changes to the ORVs Over Time Appendix N: Draft Biological Assessment Appendix O: Draft Wetland Statement of Findings	