



# MERCED RIVER TRAIL

VISION PLAN // March 2023

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Stanislaus National Forest

### **NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

Yosemite National Park



*Upstream of Incline*



# CONTENTS

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## **CHAPTER 1 // OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT // 1-43**

VISION PLAN VS. MASTERPLAN // 2

OVERVIEW OF MERCED RIVER CANYON HISTORY - BAGBY TO YOSEMITE // 4

PLANNING CONTEXT // 22

PROJECT GENESIS // 42

## **CHAPTER 2 // VISIONING PROCESS // 44-65**

PRELIMINARY DIALOGUE // 46

MERCED RIVER TRAIL COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP // 47

VISIONING FRAMEWORK // 48

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES // 50

## **CHAPTER 3 // ACTION PLAN // 66-132**

## **APPENDICES**





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**“Trail development should be minimally intrusive. Let the canyon speak for itself. It should be a trail for exercise, beauty and introspection”**

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ANONYMOUS COMMENT FROM PROJECT GOALS COMMUNITY SURVEY



# 1. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

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***With “...exceptional scenery in alternating pools and cascades,” “evidence that reflects trade, travel and settlement patterns...in an intricate and interconnected landscape of archaeological sites” and rich wildlife habitat, including for a species of salamander that occurs nowhere else in the world, the Merced River canyon is a special place, both globally and locally.***

This area boasts a diverse mix of historic, cultural, and ecological treasures that constitute a large portion of Mariposa County’s local identity and heritage.

Though recent actions have acknowledged and protected these assets, our current generation is not unique in establishing a connection with the river and its landscape. This chapter begins to place the Merced River Trail in the context of this larger story, and helps set the background for the idea and this specific effort.

The chapter includes a lengthy history—likely the first standalone history of the river canyon—that touches on the area’s earliest human inhabitants, its more recent industrial history, and present local efforts to conserve the river and canyon. This understanding is important for the trail process, both in order to effectively convey the river canyon’s history through future trail elements

like interpretive signage, furnishings, and other storytelling elements, and to inform a knowledgeable, respectful approach to engaging with this special landscape.

Realizing that others have had big ideas and grand intentions for the Merced River canyon connects the present effort to its rich past. It also helps ensure that the Vision Plan and its recommendations are properly situated in previous planning efforts. This chapter describes related local, state, and especially federal planning and prioritization efforts, to both clarify this planning project’s limits, and identify opportunities to integrate prior work into the current effort.

All of this grounding establishes the Vision Plan’s parameters, and equips the project to continue a long legacy of attachment to, and stewardship for, this cherished resource.



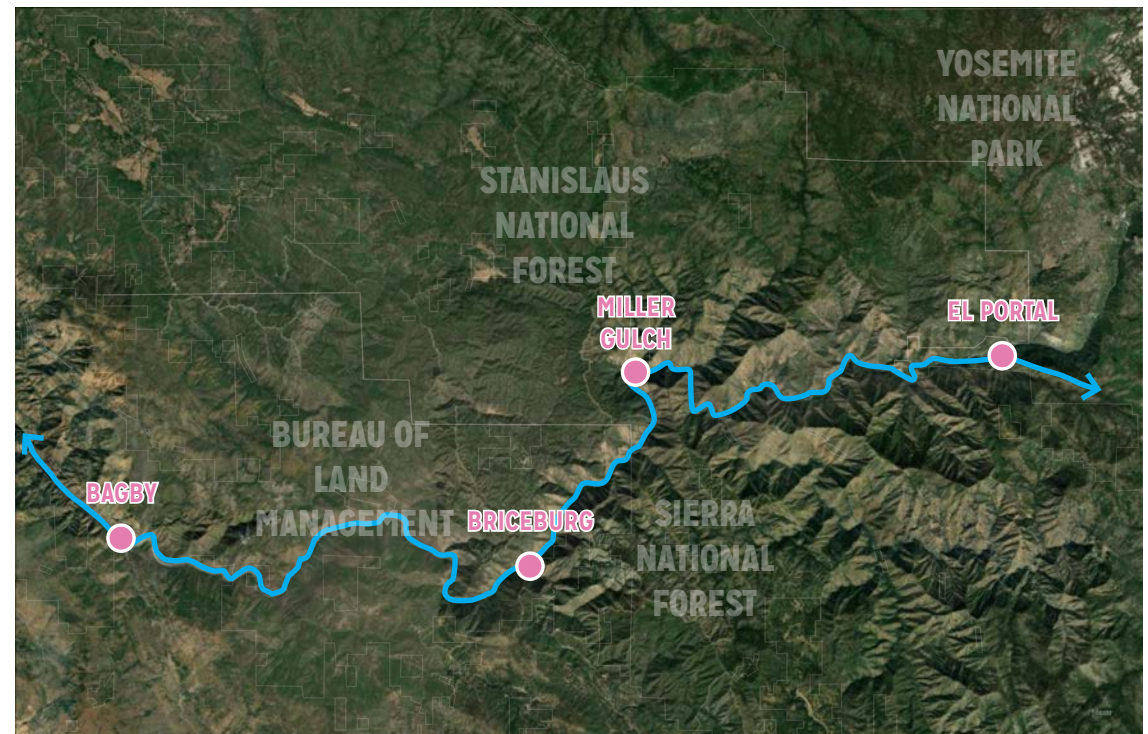
## VISION VS. MASTER PLAN //

The existing and planned segments of the Merced River Trail are located almost entirely within federal jurisdiction, with each major federal land management agency—Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS), and National Park Service (NPS)—each administering sizable portions of the trail corridor and its surrounding landscape. Additionally, the river and its immediate environs are federally designated as Wild and Scenic, meaning that Congress has taken action to formally acknowledge and protect the outstandingly remarkable values, including scenic beauty and recreational opportunities, that define this landscape and help make the trail project both so attractive and, to many, so timely.

Its status as a Wild and Scenic River set amongst vast tracts of federal public land means that the river/trail corridor is protected by strong, clearly formalized regulations and policies. However, while this planning process unfolded with the collaboration and input from federal land managers, its content have been reviewed by BLM, USFS, and NPS staff, and its recommendations have been confirmed as valid and attainable in those jurisdictions, the Merced River Trail Vision Plan **is not** a federal planning document.

Indeed, as will be discussed later in this chapter, there are already federal plans that discuss and recommend the Merced River Trail: each agency's Wild and Scenic River Management Plan explicitly mentions and recommends a non-motorized multi-use on the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade as a use that is both consistent with the Merced's designated outstandingly remarkable values, and desirable in these areas of BLM, USFS, and NPS jurisdiction.

The premise of this plan is not to duplicate those federal planning efforts, each conducted by the appropriate lead agency and subjected to the federal environmental compliance process outlined in the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA).



### INTERAGENCY JURISDICTION

The existing and future segments of the Merced River Trail, which follows significant portions of the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad in the Merced River corridor, occur in Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and National Parks Service jurisdiction, with key pockets of private right of way mixed in.



Rather, this process was initiated and facilitated by Mariposa County, to articulate the preferences and priorities of county residents who have long relied on, celebrated, and fought for this project and trail, and who will most intimately experience its benefits and impacts. Put another way, the visioning process (Chapter 2) and the recommendations that it revealed (Chapter 3) provide locally supported specificity and guidance for the agencies, building on existing plans to articulate the local communities' vision for this trail that is referred to, though not detailed, in adopted federal management plans. Importantly, this document also identifies strategies for addressing some of the longstanding implementation hurdles that have historically plagued the project, including key right of way issues and long-term maintenance and management questions.

The vision expressed in this document and its recommendations will be instructive for guiding future actions related to the Merced River Trail. However, this document falls shy of being a master plan, which would include more technical, rigorous, and granular recommendations for tasks like trail work, signage, and habitat restoration at specific locations along the trail. This document takes a birds-eye perspective on the trail project, zooming out to describe community preferences for larger issues and opportunities and laying the basis for a more detailed, collaborative, inter-agency Merced River Trail master plan in the future.

For these reasons, this document is best described as a Vision Plan. The recommendations here support future actions by the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors and county staff, but its adoption does not expressly authorize, implement, or fund any specific projects or actions. Likewise, this document does not compel or commit BLM, USFS, or NPS to carry out any actions to which they are not already committed through previous NEPA-compliant federal planning processes.



**VISION PLAN → MASTER PLAN**

Blending input from the community at large with direction from a working group of community members that report to the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors, this project makes a series of increasingly specific decisions that reflect local preferences for the Merced River Trail. The final deliverable, the Merced River Trail Vision Plan, has some overlap with, but ultimately lays the foundation a more technical master plan in the future—including establishing overarching goals, defining priorities, and identifying partners.

It does, however, set the stage for continued and expanded collaboration between the federal agencies, Mariposa County, and non-profits, institutions, and other local trail advocates to achieve the vision and its recommendations. As will be detailed in Chapter 2, this plan was co-created by a partnership of interagency stakeholders, Mariposa County residents and organizations, and staff from multiple county agencies. The visioning process helped nurture and strengthen these relationships, which will need to be maintained in order for the recommendations to be implemented and sustained.

Finally, this vision and recommendations were derived from targeted community dialogue and project-specific engagement that took place over nearly three years, and represent consensus and trade-offs among a variety of interests in the Merced River canyon. However, though this process was extensive, its outcomes represent a moment in time. As demographics in Mariposa County shift, as trends in outdoor recreation change (often in response to federal land management decisions), and as a changing climate alters the hydrological, biological, and ecological conditions in the river canyon, this vision and these takeaways will need to be revisited, reassessed, and likely revised in the future.

For now though, the Merced River Trail Vision Plan provides a community-supported blueprint for balancing the trail's civic benefits, including recreational, educational, and cultural, with the Merced River canyon's environmental significance and unique character.



## OVERVIEW OF MERCED RIVER CANYON HISTORY - BAGBY TO YOSEMITE //

The Merced River Trail combines a National Wild and Scenic River, a major highway to Yosemite National Park, much history, and remarkable natural and scenic areas. The long-abandoned railroad grade of the Yosemite Valley Railroad provides an inviting and unique 30-mile recreational resource in the Merced River canyon between Bagby and Yosemite. Today most people drive the upper 15 miles above Briceburg and appreciate its scenic beauty and the phenomenal spring floral displays. Except for the highway, it appears relatively pristine, yet this canyon has a long human history.

The Merced River Trail Community Working Group was tasked with writing a history of the canyon to include in the Vision Plan. This task was led by Dr. Ralph Mendershausen, who, with input from other CWG members, prepared the following history narrative in 2022. Dr. Mendershausen is a long time county resident and the author of a history of the South Fork Merced. He carried out the County's Historic Sites Survey for the Planning Department (1980-81) and played an active role in the designation of the Merced River as a National Wild and Scenic River. His drafts were written by him alone and are submitted here with the unanimous approval of the CWG. Note that a bibliography for this history and a historic timeline are included as Appendix A and Appendix B, and that the section on Early Trails is based on recent work by Ephriam Dickson.

### THE SOUTHERN SIERRA MIWUK //

The native people of this watershed are known collectively as the Southern Sierra Miwuk. For thousands of years before the Gold Rush period the river played a central role in the lives of the Southern Sierra Miwuk whose territory, like those of their neighbors included a major watershed. Their ancestors may have migrated into this area originally from the coast unknown millennia ago. The river was called *wakaalmuto*\*. In Yosemite Valley, it may have had a slightly different name. The river and the watersheds were important in the remarkable trade practices of the Southern Sierra Miwuk. It is striking that the obsidian flakes so common in the area originated on the east side of the Sierra as native trade goods called "blanks". These they received in exchange in return for acorns and shells. This trade route existed for millennia. Generally, the lives of the Southern Sierra Miwuk and other foothill tribes were very local, but in this case some must have travelled these trade routes regularly and over thousands of years.

The river and the streams also determined the general west to east run of migration in the course of the late spring and summer as smaller groups (tribelets) moved to higher, wetter, and cooler ground collecting a variety of foods. The river played a central role in native basket making, being the locus for redbud, willow, and sedge root. The river played a role as well in belief and society, ie. the

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\*Native names/words are important to native peoples. This one is provided here for historical accuracy; it should not be misappropriated.

concept of a water side and a land side. North of the Merced was considered the land side, and south, the water side. Frequently this was a guide to naming, marriage, and rituals.

And finally, the river was a giver of life. We can take this life giving quality quite literally for the river, at least below Yosemite, contained salmon in great numbers until at least the end of the 19th century. This was an important part of life in many of the winter villages of the Southern Sierra Miwuk. These winter villages were often located along the Merced and the South Fork and had Miwuk names. They were extensive and permanent.

Salmon was an important addition to the already abundant Miwuk diet. Salmon, for example, were just one of four anadromous species available to them in 1849. The salmon were caught in large numbers using a great variety of methods; the catch was often dried. In the fall of 1854, Nicolas Perlot, an unusually observant gold miner, noted this activity, and its smell, at "Round Valley" on the South Fork of the Merced. He also noted how they dropped everything, including searching for gold on the North Fork of the Merced to catch the salmon run on the South Fork. Drying made it possible to have the fish in powdered form during the rest of the year. Salmon seems to have entered Yosemite Valley in dried/powdered form. At the latest, the spring and fall salmon runs ended with the construction of the original Exchequer Dam by Merced Irrigation District in 1926. John C. Fremont put his first dam on the Merced in 1859, calling it Benton Mills (Bagby). It was doubtless put on top of a major named native settlement for this was a wider spot in the river and relatively easy to ford.

The Southern Sierra Miwuk and their ancestors, like many other native Californians, boasted a rich and complex relationship with their landscape. In the past, this relationship has often been described as passive, just "living off the fat of the land", but we know today that it was active, intentional, and consistent over a very long time. Their land-based lifeways provided abundant



physical, cultural, and spiritual nourishment that was cultivated through a complex interaction with the natural environment over millennia. While “farming” was not their way, they did use fire and care for trees in a systematic way. They feared large fire and practiced burning as a way to enhance seed grasses and game while reducing brush. They cared for the oak trees that sustained them well with the staff of their lives, acorns. Catastrophic fires in the canyon such as the Telegraph Fire, the Detwiler Fire, and the Ferguson Fire are terrifyingly of our time. Nor should we ignore the intense education and training it took for typical Miwuk to know some two hundred plants by name and use.

Well before the Gold Rush, in the Spanish and Mexican

periods, the Miwuk were decimated by European diseases such as malaria and cholera even though the Spaniards and the Mexicans themselves never reached this part of the Merced River. The river itself, however, was given the name we use today by a Spanish force pursuing fugitive Indians in 1806. Refugees from the missions and ranchos surely did reach the Sierras, and infectious disease would have also travelled with trade.

The decimation of the Miwuk population of our region increased dramatically with the Gold Rush. Decimation through various means continued for decades (to 1900) and eventually reached to at least 74% of the population of all three major Sierra Miwuk groups. Southern Sierra Miwuk numbered about 2700

in 1849. Sometimes death took the form of murder; at least 200 Miwuk are known to have been killed by miners outright between 1847 and 1860. Native lives lost most of their economic value in the Gold Rush period. Spanish and Mexican institutions exploited the Indians harshly, but they depended on them for labor as well. The limited protections of mutual need fell away rapidly after 1849.

For a brief while the Miwuk sought to continue their traditional life, but this quickly proved impossible because of the onslaught of miners and farmers which rearranged streams, prairies, and resources. Perlot documents their frequent participation in mining activities in the early 1850's. The actual extermination of the Indians was preached by



US Forest Service photo 50761

#### ANCESTRAL LANDS OF THE SOUTHERN SIERRA MIWUK

This photo was taken by Forest Supervisor of Sierra National Forest Charles H. Shinn. Originally set aside in 1893 when the Forest Reserve Act authorized the President of the United States to set aside timbered public lands, this landscape was re-designated as a National Forest in 1907. The neighboring Stanislaus National Forest followed a similar timeline. The Merced River is the boundary between the northern boundary of the Sierra and the southern boundary of the Stanislaus.

Just before 1907, a federal study found that, in the lands soon to be known as Sierra National Forest, there were nineteen discrete locations with Indigenous people living in groups of 10-100 individuals. Shinn himself noted that “The little Indian homes are scattered here and there, wherever a spring can be found and a little pasturage for a few horses.”

Indigenous inhabitants were not consulted in the establishment of these public lands, nor were they afforded legal rights, protections, or government support. The Merced River Trail must grapple with this legacy.

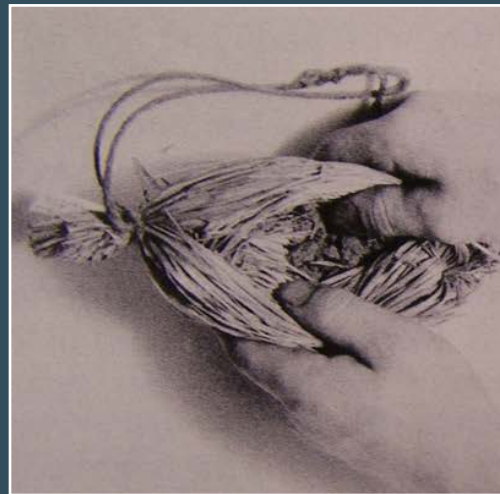
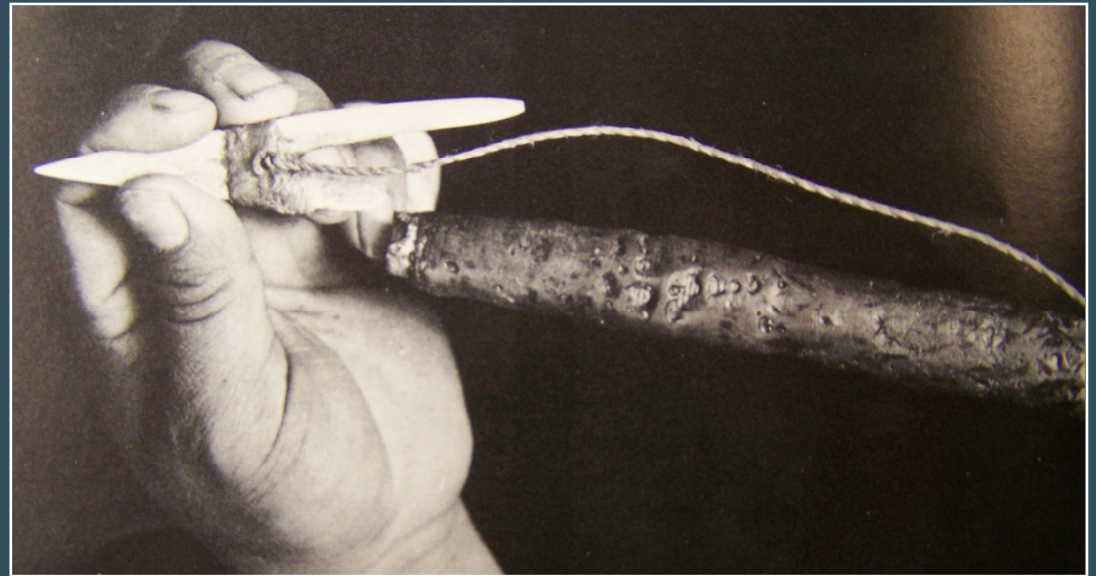


California Governor Peter Burnett and their extermination was commonly believed to be inevitable. In some rare cases bounties were placed on native scalps, but this did not occur locally.

Many local natives sought to or had to join the Gold Rush itself. Locally and somewhat ironically they sought protection in the mining fiefdom of men like James Savage. His brief empire was centered on the Merced watershed where he established an early trading post at the confluence of the South Fork and the main stem. This local *caudillo* was a paternalistic overlord to local tribes; he sought to protect them for his own profit first as miners and then as prisoners in a brief but failed reservation system in need of beef. His self-serving efforts were out of step with the profound individualism of the Gold Rush. Use of slaves and native labor crews were simply anathema to the mining ethic. Savage died trying to control “his people’s” food supply on a federal reservation.

The reservation failed; the natives wandered homewards. The result was that after Savage’s murder nothing stood between the uprooted Indian and the new State of California which had no use for them at all. Miners saw Indians as “dangerous animals”. The 1850 California “Act for the Government and Protection of the Indians” established virtual slavery; children could be obtained legally as servants, and adults could be indentured. Their right to life was not respected by those using the law to acquire or sell Indian labor. They had no civil rights and could not testify in court. To avoid starvation, they gravitated more and more to the (dangerous) edges of towns in search of low-wage, menial, day work. Their chances of survival as indentured agricultural workers were poorer than if they had not worked in the fields.

Today the Miwuk constitute about 3% of the local population and play an active part in the life of the County. They are still here. No reservation was established for the Southern Sierra Miwuk and tribal recognition has not been bestowed by the federal government. They have been seeking such recognition since 1982.



Courtesy Yosemite Research Library

#### RIVER-SHAPED LIFEWAYS

Indigenous fishers developed sophisticated and effective tools to access the nutritional and culinary benefits of the Merced’s salmon fishery. This includes spears with hooks made of bone and line made of milkweed (top), and fish-worm carriers (“huk-ken”), made of blue grass (bottom). The implements shown here belonged to Southern Sierra Miwuk Chief Lemee.



## EARLY TRAILS //

With natives largely driven from the foothills during the 1850's, miners pushed up the Merced River canyon, making several important gold strikes along the river between present Briceburg and the entrance to Yosemite Valley. By 1860 more and more mining took the form of hard rock mining. In 1860, Elijah and Ephraim Ferguson and their cousin Charles Pease discovered quartz veins containing gold on the north side of the Merced River, about one mile above the mouth of the South Fork. A mile further up the river, James Wilson and the Rutherford brothers, Thomas and Adam, also found gold bearing rocks that same summer. In 1862, John R. Hite and J. C. Wilson located gold bearing quartz on the South Fork at what became known as Hite's Cove. Additional smaller claims were established over the next several years along this stretch of the Merced River.

Rudimentary trails were initially developed to these mines for packing in supplies and equipment by mules. While the mining operation at Hite's Cove was reached by a trail from Mariposa, the mines along the north side of the Merced were supplied by a trail from Coulterville and Sonora. Only wide

enough for animals to move in single file, this trail traversed through very difficult topography with high, steep canyons and tumbles of boulders from rock slides. Traces of this early route can still be seen today on the canyon walls.

In November 1865, the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors approved a trail, designed and built by A.W. Bolton, as a public highway extending from Black's Store on Bull Creek to Jenkins Mill on the Merced River, then up the river past Green's Store at the South Fork confluence, to Ferguson's Mill, and finally ending at Rutherford's Mill, then the furthest mining operation up the river. This trail or "road" grew out of a petition of the various hard rock mining interests active in that portion of the canyon.



## HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS

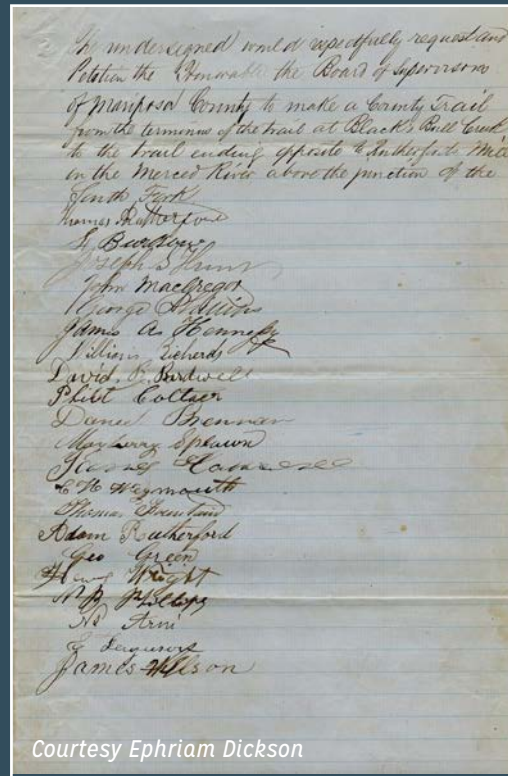
In the mid-late 19th century, local miners built trails on the north side of the Merced River to provide access to claims in the canyon. These trails became the basis of the Yosemite Valley Railroad, and later the Merced River Trail.



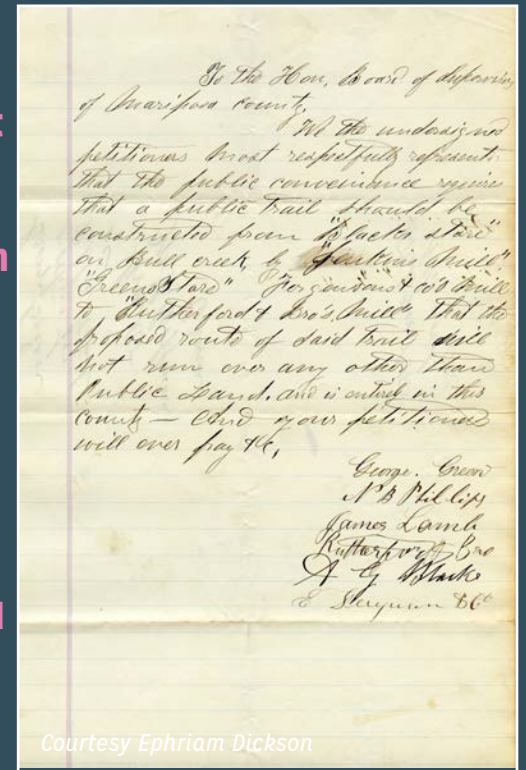
Then in 1871, Bolton proposed to expand his previous trail to the boundary of Yosemite National Park, and was granted authority to extend the existing county trail from Ferguson's Mill further along the north bank of the Merced to its junction with Cascade Creek. The trail was inspected in May 1873 and approved by the Board. The toll rate for equestrians was one dollar per head, 50 cents for a pack animal, and 25 cents for hikers. Tolls were payable at the booth Bolton built on his 80-acre claim near Cascade Creek. Bolton's extension of the county road along the river was the first all-weather route to Yosemite for tourism purposes.

The rugged canyon topography posed a major engineering challenge to developing this trail into a wagon road. Attempts were made to fund a wagon road along the Merced River in the 1880s and 1890s, but ultimately this was not accomplished until the All Weather Highway (State Highway 140) was finally completed in 1926.

**“The undersigned would respectfully request and petition the honorable Board of Supervisors of Mariposa County to make a County trail from the terminus of the trail at Black's Bull Creek to the trail ending opposite Jenkins's Mill on the Merced River, above the junction of the South Fork.”**



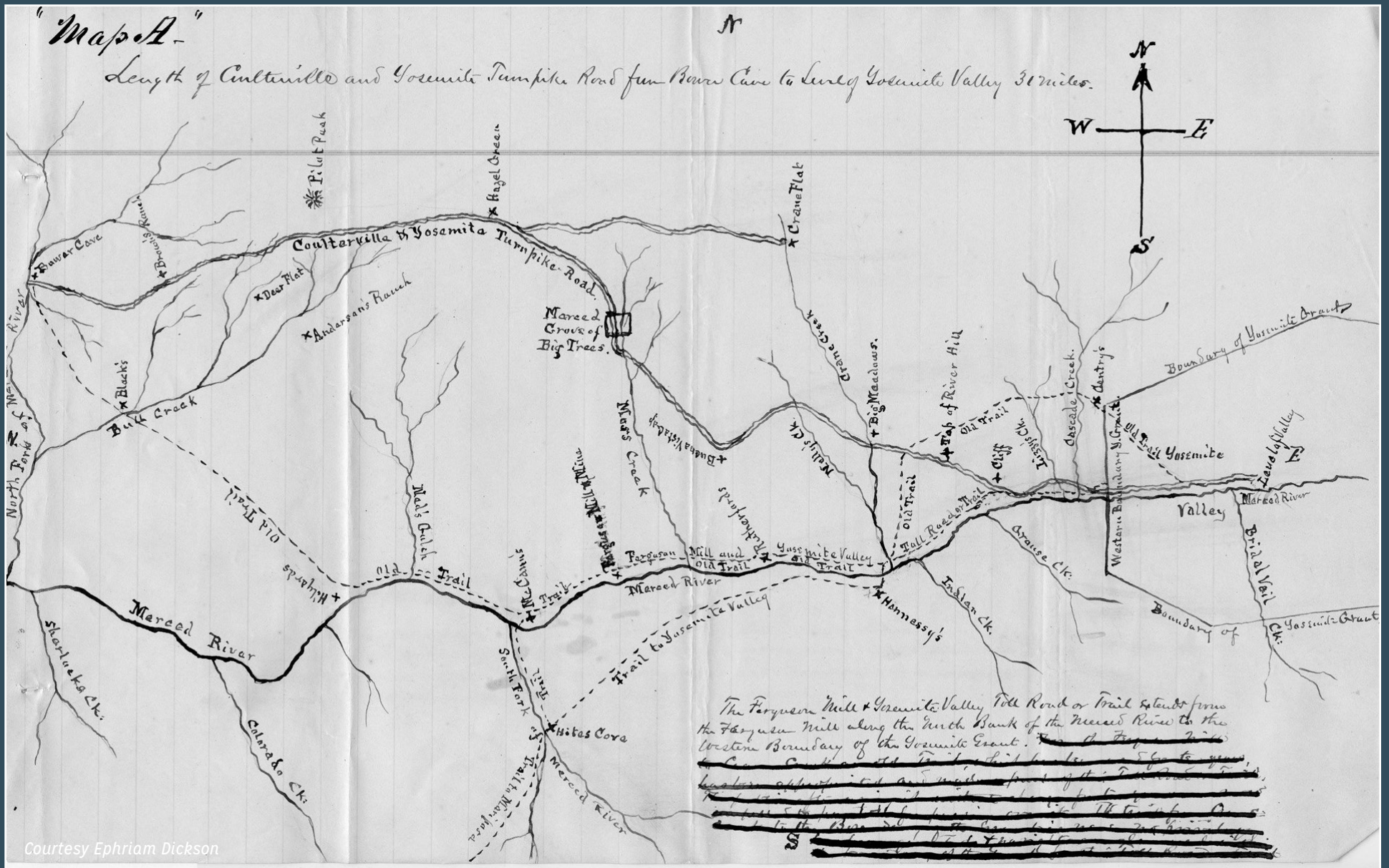
**“We the undersigned petitioners most respectfully represent that the public convenience requires that a public trail should be constructed from “Blacks’s store” on Bull Creek, by “Jenkins Mill”, Greens store”, Fergusons & Co’s mill to Rutherford & Bro’s Mill,” that the proposed route of said trail will not run over any other than public land, and is entirely in this county - And your petitioners will even pay &c.”**



#### 19TH CENTURY LOCAL TRAIL ADVOCACY

These archival documents, discovered by Ephriam Dickson, show Mariposa County residents formally petitioning the Board of Supervisors to allocate County funds to support a public trail along the Merced River in 1865. Like the later Yosemite Valley Railroad route and the current/proposed Merced River Trail, this early trail, whose route is depicted on the opposite page, was located on the north side of the river.





#### ARCHIVAL TRAIL DOCUMENTATION

The 1865 trail ran from Black's Store on Bull Creek, near its confluence with the North Fork of the Merced, down to the Merced River at Hilyard's Mill near Ned's Gulch, and then up the river past Fergusen's Mill to the Rutherford Mine and Mill, both located on either side of Moss Creek. It is possible that it was not constructed until 1866.





*Courtesy Jack Burgess*

#### **INDUSTRIAL ROOTS FOR RECREATIONAL TRAIL**

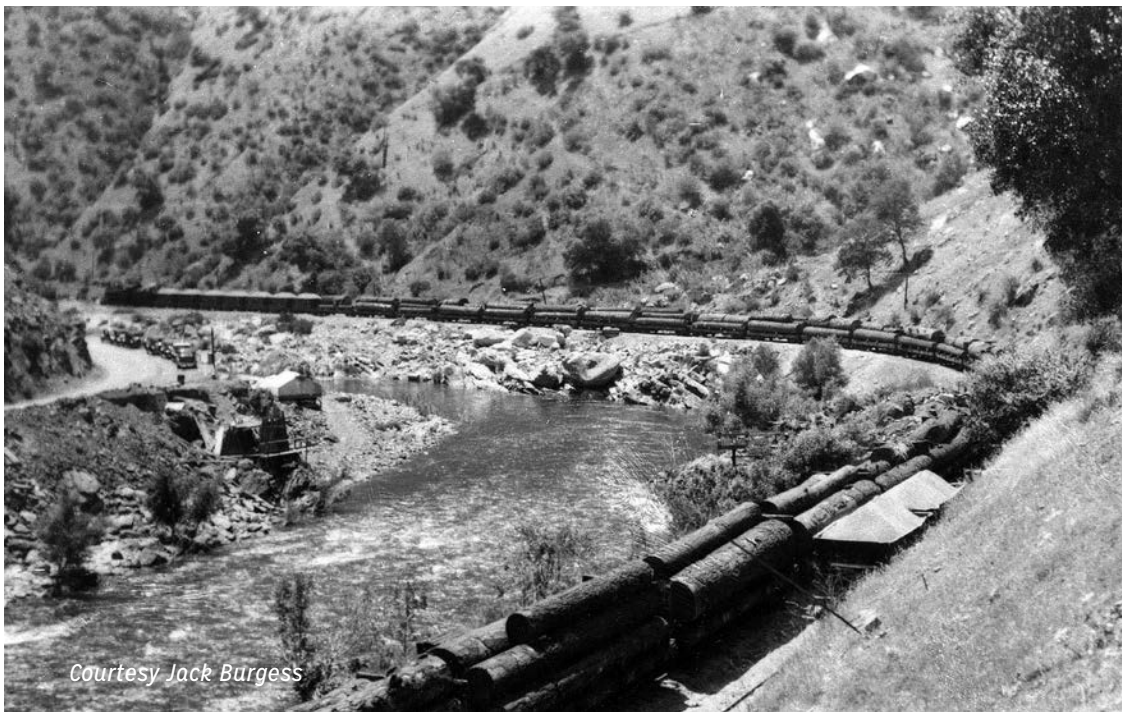
The existing and planned Merced River Trail primarily follows the course cleared for the Yosemite Valley Railroad along the northern banks of the Merced River. In the 20th century, the imperatives for moving both the materials to support resource extracting industries and their outputs, especially mining and timber, led to the establishment and maintenance of a corridor suitable for a train to regularly move through the Merced River canyon. Today, portions of that same route supports a non-motorized recreational trail, the appropriate extension and dedicated conservation of which have long been an aspiration for many in Mariposa County.



## THE INDUSTRIAL MERCED RIVER CANYON 1849-1950 //

The Gold Rush of 1848 thrust the river canyon into the industrial era. It brought placer, lode, and some hydraulic mining to the area. Virtually every side creek was explored, and some were diverted to pursue better gravels. Before long, small hamlets, mining centers, or farms (Hennessey Ranch) were established. The river itself became an engine of industry, and the canyon was filled with mechanical sounds, such as of stamp mills. This extractive industry expanded over the next century and drew to a close around 1950.

During the heyday of heavy industry (1911-1940) as many as 2000 people lived and worked in the river canyon. This was also a time when there were several little company towns at Bagby, Mountain King Mine, Briceburg, Emory (Miller Gulch), Clearinghouse, and El Portal. These were all supported by the Yosemite Valley Railroad, and as they came and went at different times, their materials were repurposed, usually upstream. Whereas in 1848 it was usually an individual miner, or pairs, or companies seeking gold through placer diggings on side streams, it was not long before mining became largely industrialized; this statewide process actually began in Mariposa County. Colonel John C. Fremont brought industrial mining to the state and to this river.



*Courtesy Jack Burgess*

Fremont's Merced River project was not just a mill and dam at the river; it required transportation to and from the river. The first incline on the river lowered full ore carts down the fall line from Bunnell Point to a river powered crushing mill. This mill was named Benton Mills for Fremont's prominent father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Unlike later inclines in the canyon the empty carts were pulled up the grade on rails. Mules provided the power. Rails then ran down the route of today's Highway 49 below Pine Tree Mine and over a curving trestle to make the hairpin turn. The mill below eventually reached 80 stamps.

The river took out its first dam, Fremont's, in the flood of 1861. Other dams followed, but as the mines deepened they flooded more, and ore quality was not consistent. In 1873, the bold, "can do" engineering idea of drilling from the river to Mariposa town hitting a series of gold mines at their bottoms failed to pay for itself after 3300 feet of trying.

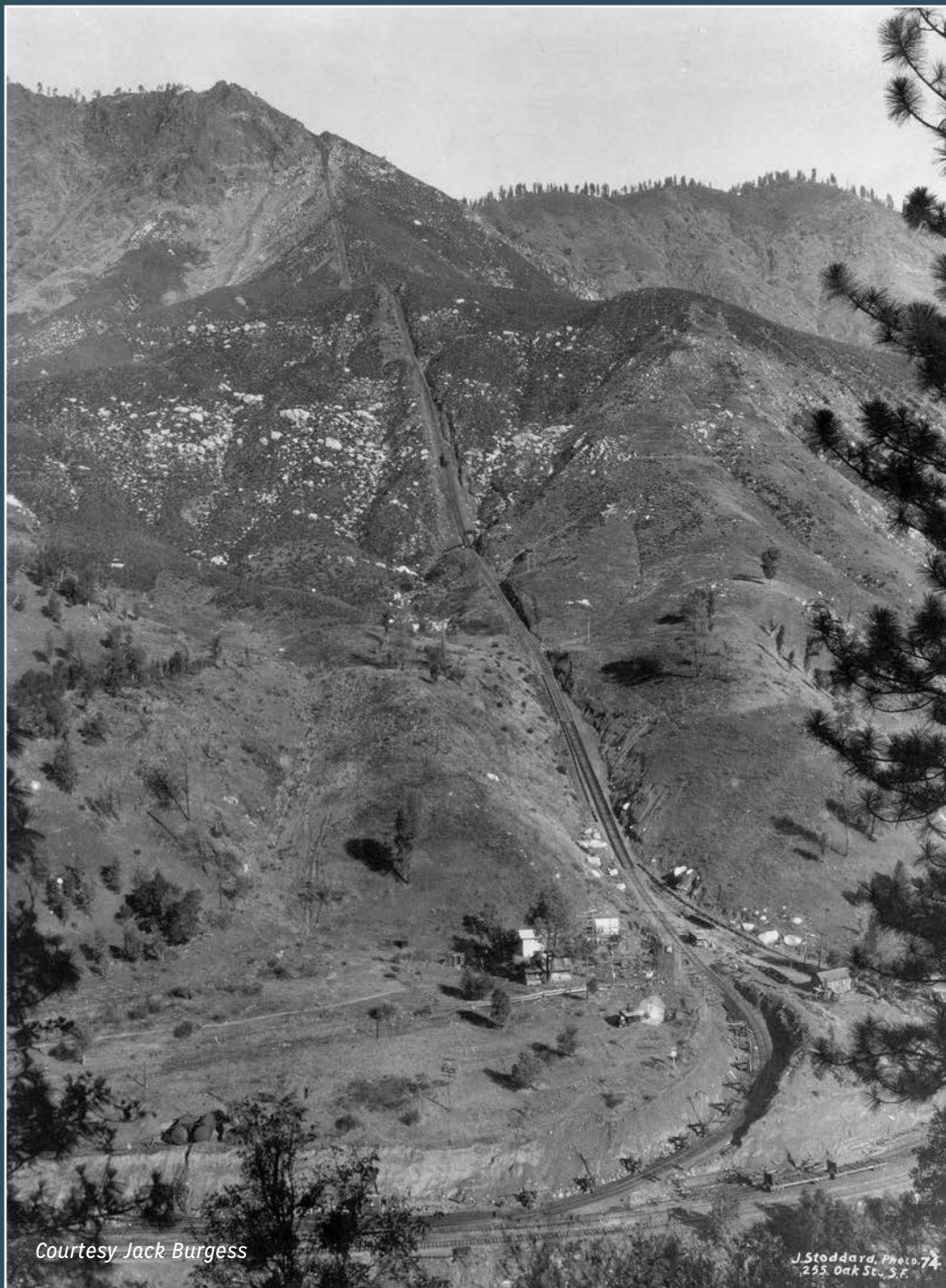
The Benton Mills dam was replaced by others, and the last dam there was for purposes of electrical generation. By then the post office was called Bagby. The Mariposa Commercial and Mining Company built this early electro project to serve their mines about 1900. They soon sold to San Joaquin Light and Power Company. Fire destroyed most of the plant in 1922. Only the bridge was replaced.

By 1923 power from San Joaquin Light and Power was reaching mines and mills at the upper end of the canyon. In 1967 the Merced Irrigation District's second Exchequer Dam flooded the Bagby area and most of its cultural and historic sites. The last hydro projects in the watershed (1980's) were precluded by

### INDUSTRIAL LOGGING

The lumber harvested from the Merced River watershed in the early 20th century was transported along the rail grade to industrial centers in the Central Valley, where it was used to build cities throughout California.





Courtesy Jack Burgess

J. Stoddard, Photo 74,  
295 Oak St., S.F.

National Wild and Scenic River designations for the main stem and the South Fork of the Merced.

The canyon's inclines are the most visible reminder of the remarkable feats of its industrial era. Inclines further up canyon used the fall line from the source of the raw materials, but they lowered and raised heavy loads at the same time. The loads passed each other at a switch. The keys to the operation were the giant hoist, a heavy cable, and a switching point. Steam donkey engines provided the initial power source. Inclines had to be long, very steep, and moved massive amounts of material.

The Yosemite Logging Company's south incline 1911-12 was 7800' long and had a grade, at one point, of 78%. Stunning tonnages of steel, locomotives, and other machinery were hauled up the track and one key part, the donkey yarder, hauled itself up over the course of three months only to fail at the point of maximum grade. The yarder was demolished; the engineer perished; the lumber company was exonerated. Two others died in 1914, killed by falling limbs, with other fatalities among the loggers.

This illustrates the remarkable human effort and risk the industrial period brought to the Canyon. 35,000,000 feet of lumber went to the mill in 1913. And the later numbers sometimes were much higher. Everything used at the top was hauled up this incline; when the Yosemite Lumber Company ran out of timber near Wawona in 1923, equipment and the infrastructure above was brought back down and moved five miles downriver to the north side of the river.

The second incline across from Indian Flat was 8300' and had a maximum grade of 68%. A second 1600' 45% grade incline had to be constructed above the first. These operations were electrified, with a substation at what is now Indian Flat. The hoist was

#### RIVER CANYON INCLINES

Remnants of the inclines used to transport raw materials, especially timber, from higher elevations to the rail grade below, are visible in many places throughout the canyon today.





*Courtesy Jack Burgess*

#### **RIPARIAN FLOODING AND INDUSTRIAL DESTRUCTION**

Though contemporary observers likely think of wildfire as the most significant threat from natural disasters in the river canyon, catastrophic wildfire appears to have been relatively uncommon in the river's recent past. Rather, major floods—especially this one in 1937, which inundated the rail grade and destroyed industrial infrastructure throughout the rail corridor—were the biggest concern. 60 years later, similar flooding along the river would have enormous consequences in Yosemite, resulting in significant changes to park operations and policies that shape life in the canyon today.



completely electric. In 1924, without missing a season, the new operation produced 60,000,000 feet of lumber; the next year it was 85,000,000. Five hundred men were employed in the woods.

Other inclines were employed at various times downriver. The limestone quarry (Miller Gulch) used to supply a cement plant in Merced, and was active in the 1920's and 1930's. Another shorter incline operated at the Mountain King Mine (gold) which had its heyday in 1915-17. All have left their marks on the river canyon long after the industries shuttered.

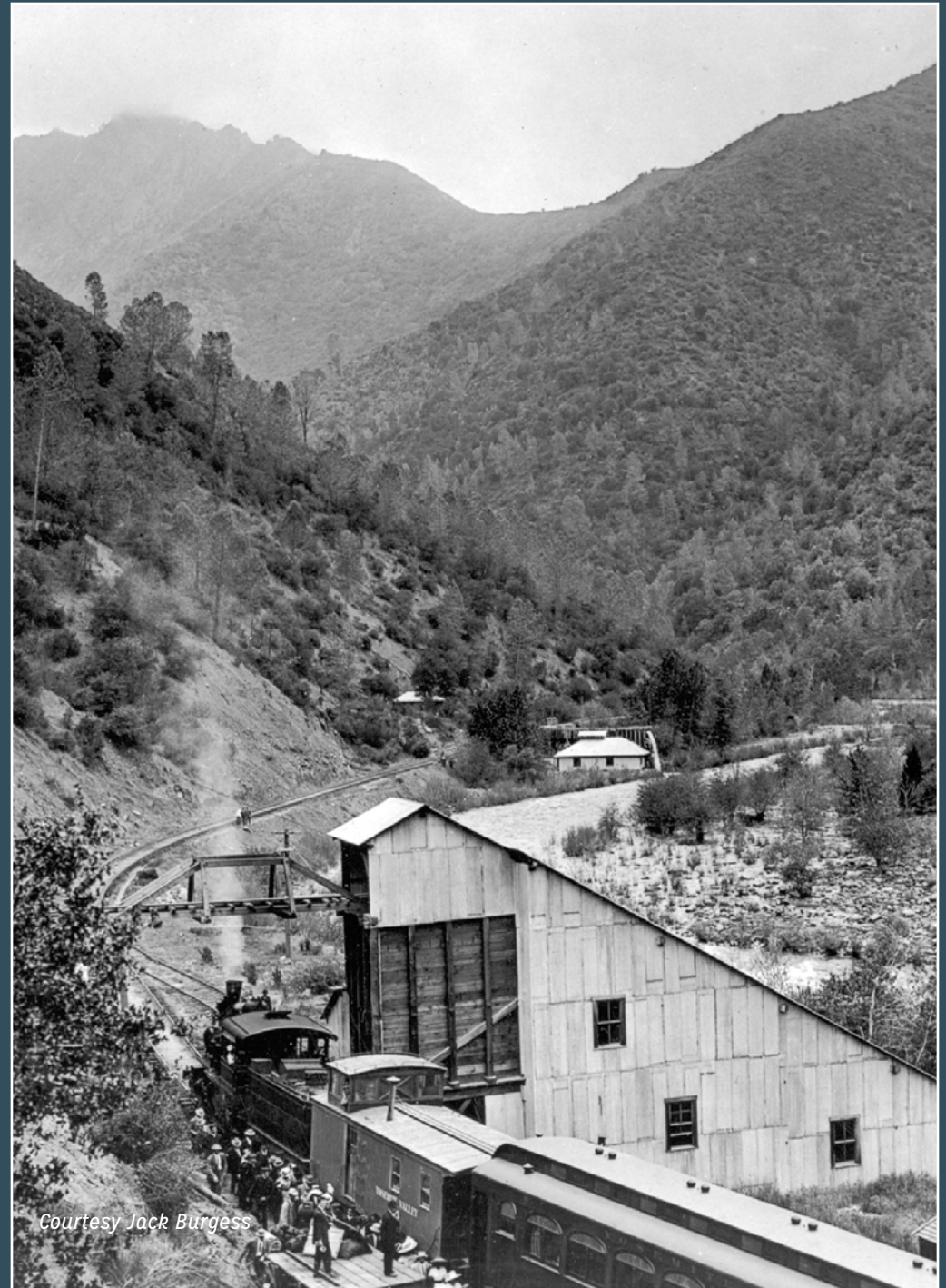
The later industrial phase of the inter-war years included gold and barium as well. The first was represented by the Clearinghouse Mine whose buildings remain on lower Incline Road. This was one of the few gold mining areas that, despite the boom and bust of mining, managed to produce in all three boom phases of area gold mining. By the end of its life, however, its gold ore was becoming considerably less profitable. Both the Clearinghouse and the National Lead Company's barium mine (1.5 miles below El Portal on the north side of the river) did well in the 1930's only to diminish later. Gold mining was non-essential in wartime, and better grade, more accessible, barium was available in Nevada.

Mining runs deep in the history of Mariposa County and the Merced River canyon. The abandoned mines in the canyon, most of them quite small, some of them extensive, are potential sites for physical accidents and chemical contamination due to the presence of mercury, arsenic, and acid rock deterioration. These may negatively affect the river. One such example is the private property at Miller Gulch above Briceburg. The old limestone quarry outbuildings burned down in the Ferguson Fire of 2018 and are immediately next to the Wild and Scenic River. As discussed later on in the Vision Plan, the planning process revealed an interest from community participants for leveraging the trail project to

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#### **CLEARINGHOUSE MINE**

The mine mill shown in the foreground here was one of several sizable buildings that supported operations at the Clearinghouse mine. Many of the structures from that era still exist in that location.



*Courtesy Jack Burgess*



facilitate restoration and enhancement activities on former mine sites in the river canyon such as this one. Many old mines have historic and wildlife values that are more positive.

The heart of the industrial phase of the Canyon story was the Yosemite Valley Railroad (YVRR) which operated from 1906-1945. The railroad, mining, and logging lobbies must have played a significant role in the reduction of Yosemite's western boundaries which had never enjoyed much support in Mariposa. The successful rollback of those boundaries was no guarantee of economic success. The

railroad's initial pitch was as a passenger line to Yosemite, but that only worked well for the first 20 years. They later, somewhat desperately, expanded this service to include the automobiles of the wealthy. YVRR played a central role in the development of all the industrial operations touched on above.

Along with electrification, the railroad underlay modernization



*Courtesy Jack Burgess*

#### **PUBLIC LANDS HOSPITALITY**

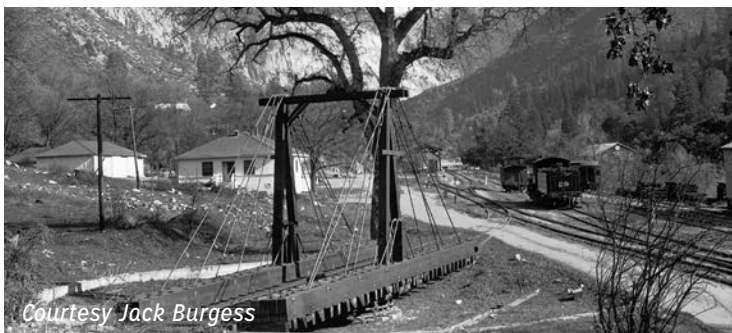
During the rail's twilight years in the 1940's, the Yosemite Valley Railroad provided passenger service from the Central Valley to Yosemite National Park via El Portal. The station's design, with its heavy emphasis on cedar bark and logs, references the "rustic" architecture that linked it to the park's aesthetics.



of industrial infrastructure in the canyon. The railroad's peak years were 1925-1926 after which it began a gradual decline to closure in 1945. Root causes of this decline were: the loss of passenger traffic to cars after the opening of Highway 140 in 1926, the decline of freight revenues when the Yosemite Sugar Pine Company sold its holdings to the government to protect Yosemite (Rockefeller Grove purchase), and the costs of repairs after the great flood of 1937. The last but inadequate customers were the limestone quarry and the barium mine.

The closure of the gold mines by the federal government at the outset of World War II did not help the railroad. Had the railroad somehow survived it would have been destroyed again and again by fire and flood. The little towns it spawned with mills, dorms, housing, school, and store are all gone, except for El Portal, which has been completely repurposed to serving tourism.

The canyon is generally very narrow, forcing industry to gamble on what the high water mark would be. Throughout the industrial phase on the Merced River, flood and fire constituted persistent threats and added unforeseen costs to all industrial activity. The single most destructive flood was probably 1937. This wrought havoc with rails, roads, mines, dams, generators, and bridges. Just about every operating industry in the canyon suffered significant loss from fire at one time or another, or repeatedly.



#### **PRESERVED RELICS OF THE PAST**

Iconic elements of the canyon's industrial past, such as this turnstile currently located in El Portal, animate the area's present, and provide the basis for historic interpretation through the trail project.

## **RANCHING AND CATTLE //**

Grazing cattle on a permit basis grew out of earlier movements of cattle from the lower foothills to the Sierra by several local ranching families such as Chase, Westfall, Pate, and Meyer. The nature of that changed with the creation of the National Park and the Forest Reserve (which would become the National Forests). After the 1905 withdrawal of 430 square miles from the west side of the original 1890 Park boundary, those lands, which reached to Jenkins Hill and the current US Forest Service western border, became Forest Reserve. These lands were open to industrial exploitation and also grazing. This withdrawal of 1905 was very popular with the mining, logging, and railroad interests. Grazing too was affected.

The Horace Meyer cattle drives and grazing permits may well have been the longest lasting in the Merced River canyon, though it is not clear when they began. The family's lease ended only in 2006. The purpose of grazing was to maintain and expand the stock of cattle rather than for beef. The bulk of this permit grazing occurred between the end of World War II and the mid-1980's. Grazing was facilitated by the failure of the railroad. Today, grazing in the canyon proper appears to be over, though it is not legally excluded.

The following is based on conversation with and a text from Betty Meyer Mankins (b.1937), Horace's daughter. The Meyers were one of three families that grazed the north side of the canyon, which was more sloping, and offered better grass with its sunnier exposure. They always used horses and dogs in their operations, but in more recent days vehicles were used to pick up and deliver stock as well. They paid a fee to the Forest per head to graze their animals. Initially the Meyers grazed from Ned's Gulch upriver to El Portal while the Jenkins Family of the Bull Creek area grazed downstream from there to the North Fork. The Schillings grazed below that to Bagby. Horace lost the Big Meadow operation to the Park in the mid-1960's and eventually moved his grazing below Ned's to cover Bagby to Miller Gulch. Horace worked with and eventually took over the Schilling and Jenkins permits downstream to Bagby. The Forest Service granted permits and "counted in" the cattle at Meyer's corral in El Portal (Rancheria Flat) at the beginning of the season.

Betty writes: "Around 1941 the Meyer's Ranch moved the operation to Hornitos Road and leased land in Whitlock, where Horace (my father) turned-out in March. Then in May, Horace drove cattle from the Summit up Hwy. 140. He camped in the flat below the Octagon and at the PG&E lot above Indian Flat. He then moved onto the gravel pit and swam the cattle across the river. He would turn in a holding field located on Rancheria Flat where the cattle were counted by (the) Forest Service. Rent was determined per animal. Following the count, the cattle were scattered down the river along the railroad grade to Ned's Gulch. When the grass dried, the cattle were moved up Ned's Gulch, Moss Canyon, and Old El Portal Road toward Foresta/Big Meadow. When Highway 140 became too busy



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**“Then in May Horace drove cattle from the Summit up Hwy 140. He camped in the flat below the Octagon and at the PG&E lot above Indian Flat. He then moved onto the gravel pit and swam the cattle across the river....**

**When the grass dried, the cattle were moved up Ned’s Gulch, Moss Canyon, and Old El Portal Road toward Foresta/ Big Meadow. When Hwy 140 became too busy for cattle drives the cattle were hauled by truck to Rancheria Flat and counted by Forest Service, and then scattered along the river canyon.”**

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BETTY MEYER MANKINS, DESCENDANT OF RIVER CANYON RANCHING FAMILY

for cattle drives the cattle were hauled by truck to Rancheria Flat and counted by Forest Service, and then scattered along the river canyon.” These Hwy 140 drives involved about 200 head of cattle and were managed by cowboys on horseback: one in front, two in the middle, two or three in back. The riders did their own counting along the way. 2-3 dogs were always along.

After the loss of Big Meadow (mid-1960’s) the Meyer operation moved down river, sharing and then acquiring the permits of the other two cattle families. The delivery of stock to the Lower River, Bagby, was also arduous. In this case, the drives went from Meyer’s Hornitos properties to Bagby by way of the Bear Valley Road and then down to the river via the Pine Tree Mine. After the construction of the current Bagby Bridge they had to follow the Hell Hollow route of Highway 49 North and then cross the bridge to turn up the abandoned railroad grade. Here they were dispersed to graze. Before the current bridge they found a new use for the Fremont incline road down the fall line from Bunnell Point. This is the spot north of the Pine Tree Mine site from which Half Dome is visible. “That was the shortest way.” The cattle were usually taken out by way of Bagby and Bear Valley, but some were taken out by truck from Briceburg in later years. Meyer had a small corral there.

Grazing continues to be legal in the steep Merced River canyon, and there is an active permit (but no actual cattle). Permitting has become more complicated and current permits come with a fencing requirement. Merced Irrigation District has no interest in having cattle by the water, and BLM is primarily focused on the recreational uses in the canyon itself. The logistics and economics of grazing cattle on the steep slopes may not make sense today. While legal and theoretically possible, grazing in the BLM portion would have to satisfy the requirements of both BLM and MID. According to BLM sources, there remain a few feral cattle from earlier leases. These can cause problems and occur on both sides of the Lower Merced, ie, in the Sherlock Creek Area about 7 miles below Briceburg.



*Courtesy Betty Mankins*

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#### **BIG MEADOW CATTLE PENS**

When browse became more scarce in lower elevations in the foothills, some Mariposa-area ranching outfits moved herds to higher elevations, where mountain meadows provided forage for cattle in the warmer months. Some families moved herds through the Merced River canyon to access landscapes like Big Meadow near Foresta.



Highway 140 is one of three western access routes to Yosemite National Park, and while it is used less than the others, it is still used heavily, particularly during the winter and spring. It is the preferred all-weather route at the time of year when tourism is reduced somewhat. Day use is the norm today.

The rapid expansion of short-term vacation rentals in the Mariposa area testifies to the popularity of day use. Heavy use of the highway has already had consequences in the canyon. One hears the sounds of the river from the road, but one also hears the sounds of the road from the river. Dispersed camping on the western edge of Yosemite is limited so there are occasionally inappropriate campsites. Pressure on canyon resources will increase as park visitation expands. Today, Yosemite directs visitors to the canyon as a recreational option. Park closures also seem to increase the interest in canyon recreation.

The Merced River canyon today did not have to look the way it does now. Despite its industrial past it remains largely undeveloped and unmarred by commercial development. It provides a spectacular access to the park in all seasons. Especially amazing are the flower displays in the spring. There is little of the industrial past left to see. And if we cherish the canyon as it is now we should be grateful for that.

In 1983 Merced Irrigation District wanted to put a large dam on the South Fork, and Mariposa came to expect water from the same. The necessary infrastructure and the dam itself would have completely altered the wild and steep South Fork canyon. This project, along with other smaller hydro projects on the Merced River itself, were prevented by the designation of both the Merced River and its

South Fork as National Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Designation was the work of a national campaign doggedly pursued by the local Merced Canyon Committee. The push for dams in the 1980's grew out of the Energy Crisis and Oil Embargo, but in the Western US this push came up against a countervailing need to protect the few remaining undammed river miles. Today less than a quarter of one percent of the country's river miles are in the National Wild and Scenic River system.

Many of those miles are in California, and since 1992, 114 miles are in Mariposa County. The Merced River above Briceburg was added to this system in 1987 by Act of Congress and signed into law by President Reagan. It takes an Act of Congress to change an Act of Congress, so the designation seems fairly secure. Had the Merced Irrigation District (MID) project gone through and been built it would doubtless have been severely damaged or destroyed in the Ferguson Fire of 2019 and the flood of 1997. As described in the following section, the designation of the river as a National Wild and Scenic River is now the basis of planning in the Merced River canyon. The management and protection of the outstanding qualities of the rivers is left to federal land management agencies.

Mariposa County's claim to the water of the South Fork was as old as the county itself but had proved impractical. The Wild and Scenic designation finally created the opportunity for a greater realism, which was realized in the Saxon Creek Project in the early 1990's. For this reason, in part, the Merced River below Briceburg was not designated until 1992. This functional twelve-inch "straw" in the river was worth



### LOCAL CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP

In the 1980's, Mariposans organized to advocate for the conservation and protection of the Merced River, and secured federal designation of the upper portions of the river and its canyon as Wild and Scenic. Continued citizen leadership will be necessary for the Merced River Trail vision to be realized.

much more than a fantasy and helped get Mariposa town through the severe water shortage of 2015. The Saxon Creek Project pumping station now sends Merced River water to Stockton Creek reservoir. It is buried deep below the incline road a mile down from Briceburg. BLM insisted on an almost invisible project. BLM also used the five year delay to bring an end to a obvious tendency by some miners to lay private claim to public lands, ie. discouraging public access. Today mining rivers and streams using dredges is illegal in California according to the Fish and Game Code.

A number of major resource issues have arisen since designation. This includes, of course, the required management plans from BLM, USFS, and NPS, wherein the agencies laid out their goals and objectives for the Wild and Scenic Merced and South Fork (USFS). The



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Courtesy Ralph Mendershausen

plans are discussed elsewhere in this section. The Ferguson Slide repair of Highway 140 has also to contend with the problem of "emergency" buttresses in the river, a clear violation of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The South Side rock shed fix to the slide is the best way to protect the river and is the present solution.

MID has tried to raise its lake level through various means, but this too has come up against the protected status of the river. Although MID has not abandoned its effort for a slight increase in capacity, it has yet to make any progress, even during a most politically favorable time (2016-2020). It is not clear why they have not pursued the matter recently.

The Merced River Trail itself emerges as a distinct planning concept with the Wild and Scenic designation of the Merced River. In early August 1989 the National Park Service's Western Region released a 30-page report marking a collaborative planning effort by NPS, BLM, USFS, MID, and Mariposa County: "Merced River Trail: Opportunities and Constraints." The first paragraph in the report reads: "The Merced River Trail combines a Wild and Scenic River, one of the nation's premier national parks, a fascinating history, and important ecological areas into an exciting opportunity for a hiking, bicycling, and equestrian trail. The abandoned Yosemite Valley Railroad bed provides a route that, with very little additional work, can become a prime recreational resource in the Merced River canyon." The full study is included in Appendix M.

Thirty years later we can see that the initial concept of the trail was heavy on the opportunities of the situation. Today Mariposa County is partner with other agencies seeking ways to provide opportunities while protecting the many outstanding and remarkable values of the Merced River Canyon.

## NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION AND ACTION

After the industrial era, several local non-profits, including the Merced Canyon Committee, Merced River Conservation Committee, and Upper Merced River Watershed Council have formed to serve the river and its landscape.



## PLANNING CONTEXT //

This Vision Plan does not stand alone as the only or even primary planning document for the Merced River Trail project. Rather, it exists in a wider context of federal, local, and state/regional planning efforts that this project builds upon, directly implements, and/or must take into account in order to be both appropriate and actionable. This section summarizes the specific implications of these previous planning efforts for the Merced River Trail.

## FEDERAL PLANNING CONTEXT //

Nearly all of the Merced River Trail is located in the public domain, on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and National Park Service. Since the river is designated as Wild and Scenic (WSR) in all of these jurisdictions, each agency has their own WSR management plan, and each has direct relevance to the Merced River Trail. Understanding these previous federal

planning efforts and their handling of the Merced River Trail concept is essential to developing a feasible Vision Plan and recommendations for the trail that aligns with federal priorities and authorities.

### WILD AND SCENIC RIVER ACT



APPROXIMATELY  
**23 MILES**  
OF EXISTING AND POTENTIAL  
MERCED RIVER TRAIL IN  
WILD AND SCENIC RIVER  
JURISDICTION

The Merced River is a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (NWSRS), which was established by Congress in 1968 through the passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA; Public Law 90-542; 16 U.S.C. 1271). The Act protects rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, recreational, and similar values for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

The law preserves the free flow and excellent water quality of rivers in the national system, while allowing for appropriate use and development that does not adversely affect the river's outstandingly remarkable values (ORV). As noted in the Act:

*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 Congress declares that the established national policy of dams and other construction at appropriate sections of the rivers of the United States needs to be complemented by a policy that would preserve other*

*selected rivers or sections thereof in their free-flowing condition to protect the water quality of such rivers and to fulfill other vital national conservation purposes. (Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, October 2, 1968)*

The WSRA requires federal agencies to “protect and enhance” ORV, establish legal boundaries for designated areas, and classify federally administered rivers in the NWSRS. Section 2(b) of the WSRA defines the following river classifications:

#### **Wild River Areas:**

Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments and generally inaccessible except by trail, with watersheds or shorelines essentially primitive and waters unpolluted. These represent vestiges of primitive America.

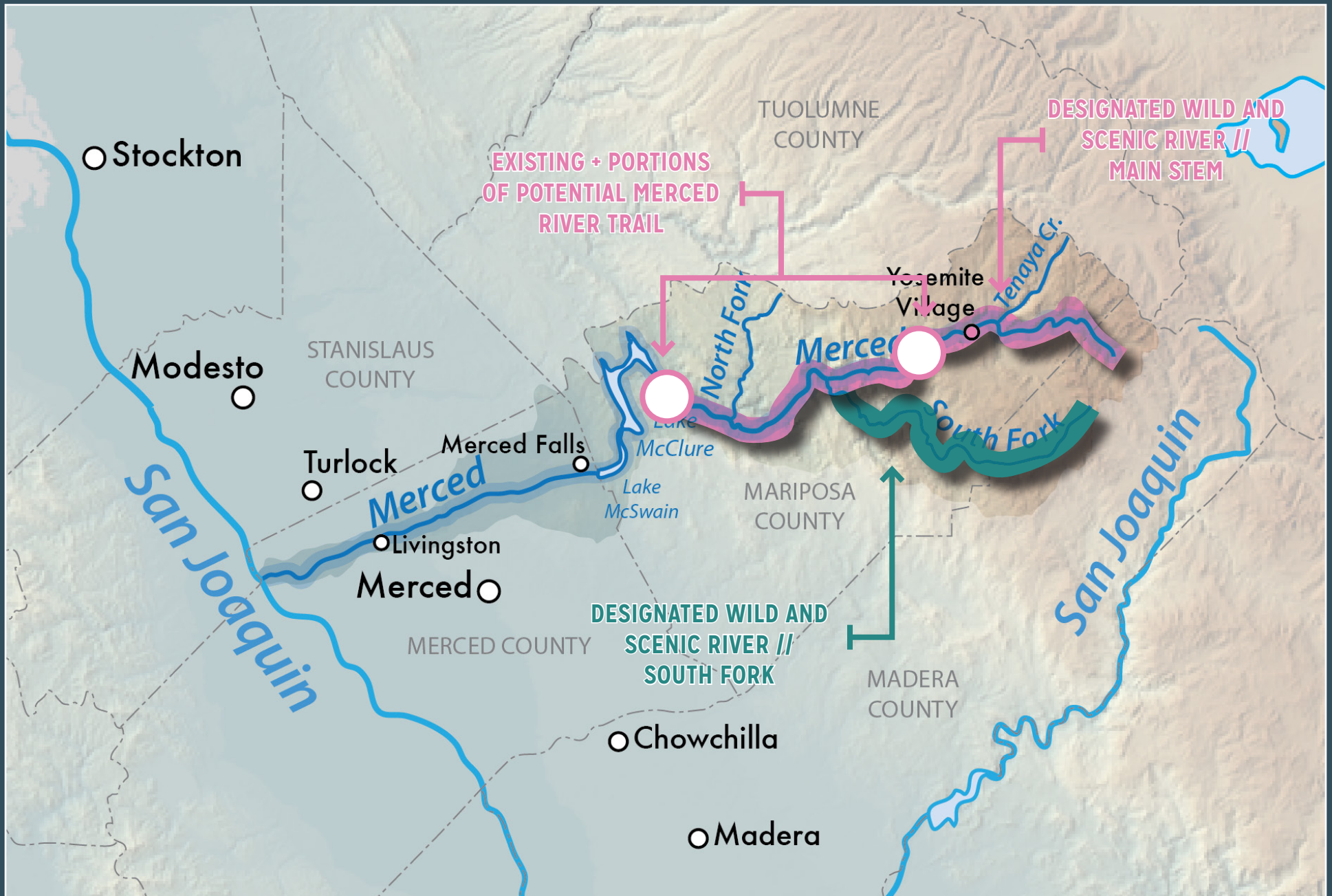
#### **Scenic River Areas:**

Those rivers or sections of rivers that are free of impoundments, with shorelines or watersheds still largely primitive and shorelines largely undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads.

#### **Recreational River Areas:**

Those rivers or sections of rivers that are readily accessible by road or railroad, that may have some development along their shorelines, and that may have undergone some impoundment or diversion in the past.





#### ENHANCED FEDERAL PROTECTION

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act affords significant protections to preserve the “natural, cultural, and recreational values” of river segments in the United States, including 122.5 miles of the main stem and South Fork of the Merced River. The existing segments of the Merced River Trail and much of the proposed trail follows the designated areas of the main stem.



Section 4(d) of the WSRA establishes river corridor boundaries for administering agencies, mandating protection of the free-flowing nature, water quality, and unique ORV, regardless of classification. The legal boundary established for Section 4(d) “shall generally comprise that area measured within 1/4 mile from the Ordinary High Water Mark on each side of river.” (WSRA, October 2, 1968)

Section 7 of the WSRA requires a rigorous process to ensure that proposed “water resources projects,” implemented or assisted by federal agencies within the bed and banks of designated rivers, and/or the tributaries to the main stem, do not have a “direct and adverse effect” on the values for which the river was designated. “Water resources projects” include non-Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) licensed projects, such as dams, water diversions, fisheries habitat and watershed restoration, bridges and other roadway construction/reconstruction, bank

stabilization, channelization, levees, boat ramps, and piers that occur within the bed and banks of a designated WSR, and those that affect the river’s free-flowing characteristics. Water resources projects that may have a direct and adverse effect on the ORV must either be: redesigned and resubmitted for a subsequent Section 7 determination; abandoned; or may proceed following written notification of the Secretary of Interior and the United States Congress.

#### **MERCED WILD AND SCENIC RIVER DESIGNATION**

On November 2, 1987, Public Law 100-149 amended the WSRA by including 114.5 miles of the Merced River in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The designation applies to the section of river extending from the headwaters in Yosemite National Park (YNP) to a point 300 feet upstream of the confluence of Bear Creek (71 miles), and the South Fork of the river from its headwaters in YNP to the confluence with the main stem (43.5 miles). Specific sections are administered by the Secretary of the Department of Interior (DOI), and the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture (DOA). The National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are agencies within the DOI, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is an agency within the DOA. On October 23, 1992, Public Law 102-432 amended the WSRA, to include 8 additional miles of the lower Merced River into the NWSRS, administered by the BLM. This lower segment begins near Briceburg, and ends at Lake McClure, totaling 12 miles under BLM’s management responsibility. Following the 1992 amendment to WSRA, a total of 122.5 miles of the Merced are included in the NWSRS.

This segment was proposed for designation after the initial designation of the upper Merced River for two reasons. First, BLM was tasked with removing illegal occupation and adverse mining activities along the lower Merced. Second, a multiple agency planning effort was needed to design and approve a drinking water system for Mariposa County. The Sierra National Forest (SNF) manages 29.5 miles of the Merced WSR corridor (including the South Fork Merced River). BLM manages the whitewater rafting program in the Merced River corridor from Redbud put-in downstream to the WSR boundary.

Today, the Merced River Trail formally exists along nearly 12 miles of the main stem of the federally designated Merced Wild and Scenic River. The existing trail is located entirely in BLM jurisdiction. As will be described elsewhere in this Vision Plan, an additional 11.5 miles of trail and—about 8.5 miles in USFS jurisdiction and about 3 miles in NPS jurisdiction—are included in the recommended trail route between Bagby and Yosemite National Park. Additional miles of the recommended trail route are in the Merced River watershed, but not located adjacent to the federally designated river and therefore are outside of the WSR area.

Nonetheless, the individual and collaborative WSR planning initiatives for each of these federal agencies are extremely relevant to the community’s vision for the Merced River Trail, and are described in more detail in the following sections.

**“From its source on the south side of Mount Lyell at 13,114 feet, through a glacially carved canyon within Yosemite National Park, the river flows downstream to Lake McClure Reservoir.**

**The Merced, including the South Fork, flows through exceptional scenery—glaciated peaks, lakes and alpine and subalpine meadows—in alternating pools and cascades. Wildflower displays are spectacular.”**

MERCED RIVER WILD AND SCENIC DESIGNATION

## BLM // USFS JOINT AGENCY PLANNING

As neighboring federal agencies with shared responsibilities to administer the Wild and Scenic River Act on the Merced River, BLM and USFS collaborated, with USFS as lead agency, to jointly develop several planning and environmental compliance documents for the river in their respective jurisdictions. These include:

- “South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Environmental Impact Statement, March 1991 (MWSR FEIS)”
- “South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic River Record of Decision, November 1991 (MWSR ROD)”
- “South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic River Implementation Plan, November 1991 (MWSR IP)”

The plans were developed while considering the following responsibilities: “(1) Protect the free-flowing condition of the river, preserve and protect the values for which it was designated; (2) Provide recreational opportunities within the capability of the resource” (USFS and BLM 1991). The MWSR Boundary EA established and documented the wild and scenic river boundary, and the associated segment classifications (i.e., “wild”, “scenic”, and “recreational” segments) for both agencies. The 1991 MWSR FEIS plan described wildlife/fisheries, vegetation, geologic, historical/cultural, recreational, and scenic ORV that will be protected and enhanced through the plan implementation. They are:

**the geologic/mineral ORV**, which emphasizes a metamorphic belt of steep metasedimentary and metavolcanic rocks of Paleozoic and Mesozoic ages; placer gold deposits in stream alluvium, and gravel terraces above the river;

**the scenic ORV**, which describes the entire WSR corridor, highlighting the river’s free flow, scenic steep-sided gorges, and heavily dissected ridges and deep narrow canyons;

**the wildlife/fisheries ORV**, which includes a diverse range of native and introduced fish species, abundant bird and animal species. The rarest species within the river corridor under BLM’s jurisdiction is the limestone salamander (*Hydromantes brunus*), listed as threatened under the California’s Endangered Species Act. Their range is restricted to a 20-mile stretch of the Merced from Sweetwater Creek to the headwaters of Lake McClure;

**the vegetation/rare plants ORV**, which consists of special status species occurring within the Merced River corridor between El Portal and Briceburg, to include: Yosemite onion (*Allium yosemitense*), Congdon’s lewisia (*Lewisa conqdonii*), Merced clarkia (*Clarkia linquolata*), Congdon’s woolly sunflower (*Eriophyllum conqdonii*), and shaggyhair lupine (*Lupinus spectabilis*);

**the cultural resource ORV**, which is described as recorded Indian grinding rocks and habitation sites (midden and bedrock mortars) overlain with historic features, such as building remnants and grave sites, historic cabins, and other nineteenth century lode gold mining features.

Two historic properties are located in the corridor under BLM’s management authority: (1) Yosemite Valley Railroad operated between 1907-1945, carrying passengers and freight through the canyon, from Merced to El Portal; (2) The historic Briceburg Inn, now used as a BLM visitor center, is an architecturally

significant building constructed in 1927. Prior to its construction, the parcel was the site of Camp E, a convict labor camp for prisoners who constructed the Yosemite All-Year Highway (now State Route 140); and

**the recreation ORV** includes unique whitewater boating, camping, fishing, hiking, swimming, and recreational mining for gold.

The 1991 MWSR USFS/BLM ROD documented the agencies’ decision to select Alternative C for managing segments within their respective jurisdictions. The MWSR Implementation Plan provides a consistent vision for future management of the wild and scenic river, while addressing specific resource management questions, and resolving conflicts of use within the river corridor.

Plan objectives, with areas of particular relevance for the Merced River Trail **highlighted**, include:

- Provide for the long term protection for ORV, free-flow, and water quality of the MWSR.
- **Manage segments for visitor use and enjoyment, while leaving areas unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as a natural setting.**
- **Establish levels of hiking, camping, fishing, off-road vehicle, grazing, and mining use that prevent degradation of the area’s character.**
- Provide varying levels of accessible, barrier-free facilities and programs for all recreation users.
- **Coordinate management of lands within the WSR with other agencies, and maintain relationships with the public and user groups.**
- Provide cost-efficient fire management program; maintain fuel load conditions consistent with natural fire ecology within the river corridor.





#### FEDERAL DESIGNATION AND PROTECTION

The Merced River's designation as a Wild and Scenic River compels the federal agencies with jurisdiction over the designated segments—in this case, Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and National Park Service—to plan and take action to conserve and enhance the river qualities that make it worthy of federal designation. These include ecological, historic, and recreational values that have served as the foundation of the Merced River Trail Vision Plan.

- Manage stream channels and riparian zones to provide quality habitat for self-sustaining trout populations.
- Implement practices to retain soil stability, productivity, and water and air quality.
- Manage the MWSR corridor effectively, while responding to compatible economic and social needs of the public and local communities.
- Maintain or enhance the habitat of threatened, endangered, rare and sensitive plants and animals within the area.

The implementation plan calls for specific recreation-related objectives for the main stem MWSR corridor (classified as “recreational”), including several with particular

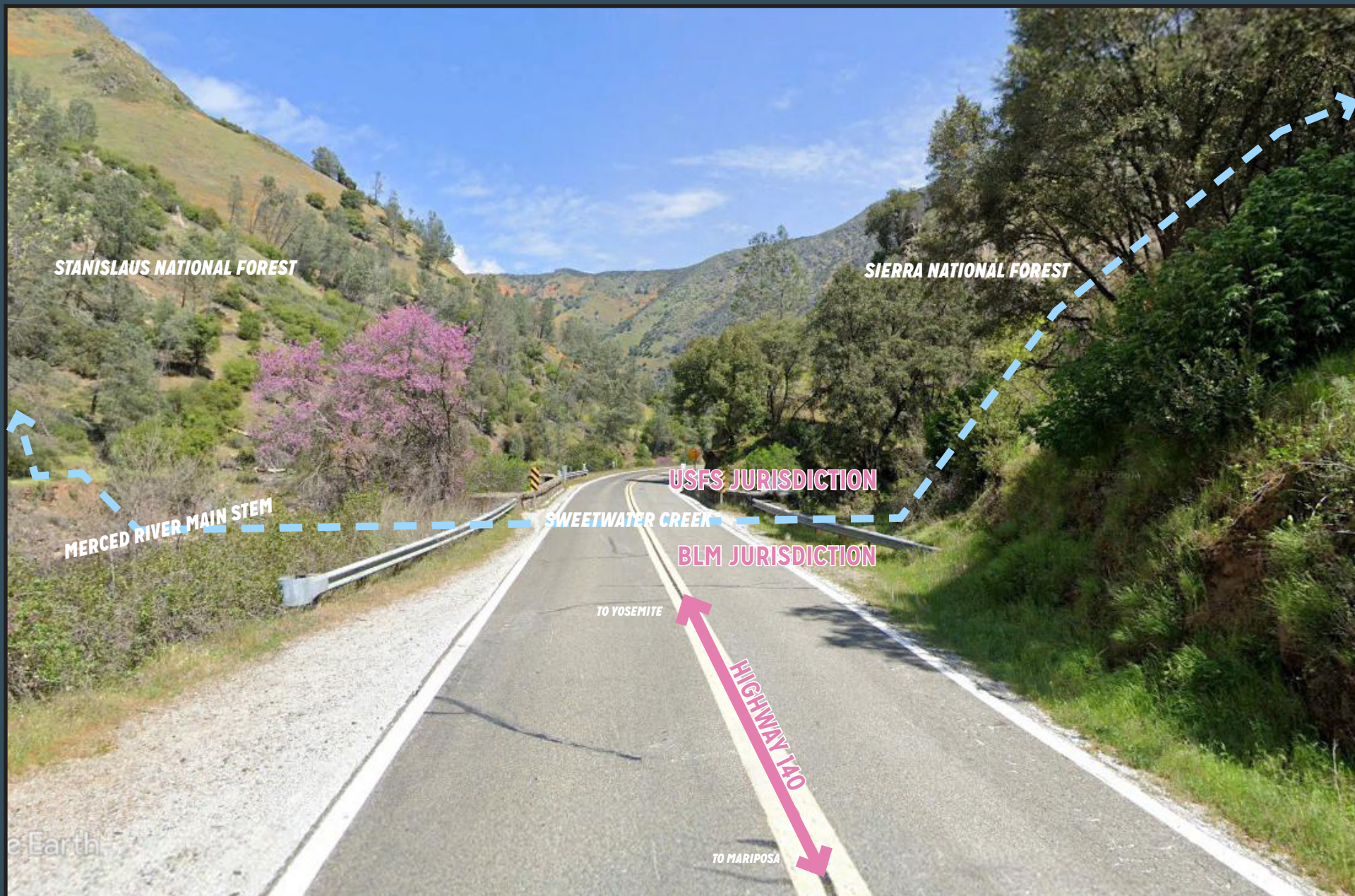
relevance for the Merced River Trail, which have been **highlighted**.

- **Allow the potential multi-agency “Merced River Trail” on the old Incline railroad grade to be implemented on USFS and BLM administered lands. Manage for foot, horse and mountain bicycle use. Develop trailhead and parking at designated road access points. Recreation capacity would increase from the current levels of use within the MWSR “recreation” zone if the trail is constructed. This action would include a planned monitoring approach, public use controls and sanitation facilities to mitigate potential negative effects.**
- Identify new or existing trails that require re-construction or rehabilitation; **analyze and identify types of uses permitted on the trail system**; when possible, provide separate trails for equestrian and bicycle use, while permitting hikers on both systems.
- Identify and interpret significant cultural resources that are not subject to damage from increased use.
- Construct new recreation facilities in existing development areas to meet existing needs.
- **Obtain easements for public access across private lands; acquire scenic easements, or purchase private lands within corridor boundary.**
- Complete fire management, water monitoring and protection, and visual resource monitoring plans.
- Prohibit motorized access in or across all “wild” segments, with the exception of private landowner’s legal right-of-way.
- Establish whitewater allocations based on existing carrying capacity of the river recreation resources.
- Maintain trails consistent with Recreation Opportunity System (ROS)\* at levels determined designated river opportunity class or zone.
- Develop a carrying capacity for the river corridor; adopt Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC)\*\*, monitor and adjust capacities, permits, and/or allocations to protect ORV. Monitoring system findings may trigger future management changes.

\*The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum is a recreation management process, an approach to assessing carrying capacity that agencies use for decision-making regarding the type of conditions that will be permitted.

\*\*The LAC is used for classifying areas in relation to the types of recreation opportunity experiences that are or can be provided, and the settings in which they occur.

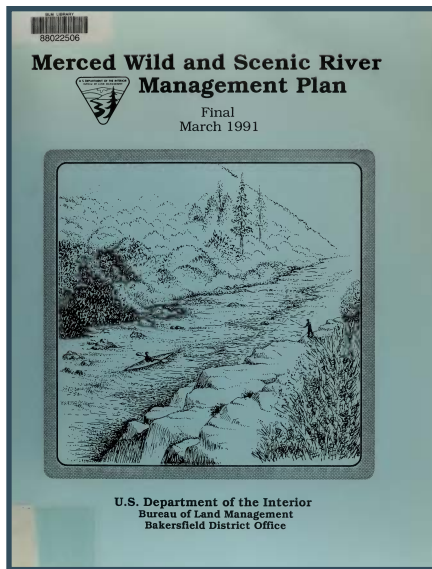




#### JURISDICTIONAL CONFLUENCE

The boundary between BLM (downstream) and USFS (upstream) jurisdiction in the Merced River canyon is located roughly where Sweetwater Creek meets the main stem of the Merced River. Additionally, within USFS jurisdiction, the Merced serves as the boundary between Sierra and Stanislaus National Forests, with both units having management and operational responsibilities in the area. This mix of administrative roles emphasizes the importance of collaborative interagency planning in the canyon.





APPROXIMATELY  
**12 MILES**  
 OF EXISTING MERCED  
 RIVER TRAIL IN BLM-  
 MANAGED WILD AND SCENIC  
 RIVER JURISDICTION

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 authorizes BLM to enforce laws relating to the public lands or their resources. In compliance with the WSR, BLM and USFS identified the river corridor boundary and classified river segments under their legal jurisdictions (USFS 1989).

BLM completed a MWSR Management Plan in March 1991, for the 12 miles of river under their authority, outside of USFS and NPS boundaries, including commercial boating management of river segments within the Merced River corridor, from Redbud put-in (Foresta Bridge) to the Briceburg segment (near confluence of Bear Creek). Although the plan was finalized prior to the addition of 8 miles of the MWSR under their administration, the plan assumed that segment of river would be designated. River segments solely administered by BLM, which together include all of the existing Merced River Trail, are classified as follows:

***Recreational segment (4 miles):***

from the USFS/BLM boundary, to 300' upstream of confluence of Bear Creek and the Merced River.

***Recreational segment (5 miles):***

300' upstream from confluence of Bear Creek and the Merced River to Mountain King Mine

***Wild segment (3 miles):***

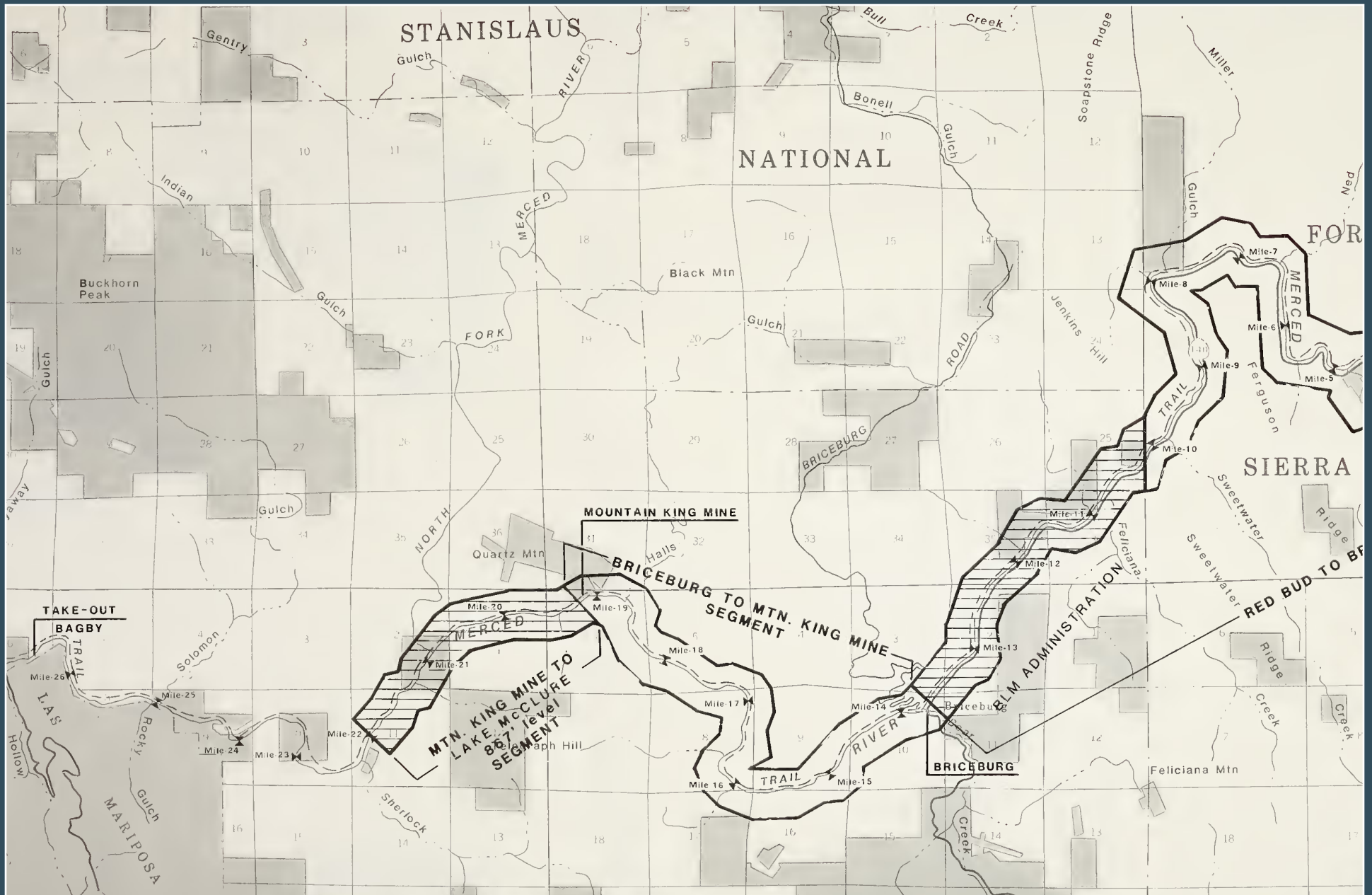
Mountain King Mine to Lake McClure at the 867' level, which is the reservoir height of the impoundment by the new Exchequer Dam.

The 1991 BLM MWSR Final Management Plan lists specific area objectives for the segments of river within the agency's sole jurisdiction. Those with particular relevance to the Merced River Trail have been **highlighted**.

- Preserve and enhance the quality of the viewshed and watershed.
- Preserve and enhance riparian habitat.
- Maintain and enhance water quality.
- Maintain and enhance wildlife and fisheries values with special emphasis and priority given to the limestone salamander and its habitat.
- Maintain a diversity of land based and water based recreation opportunities.
- **Minimize long term human influence outside of existing and proposed development sites.**
- Meet Mariposa County water management needs with minimum environmental impact to the river.
- Eliminate and prohibit residential occupancy of the wild and scenic river corridor on public land.
- **Acquire private land within the wild and scenic river corridor by exchange, easement, sale or other voluntary means.**
- **Maintain an appropriate level of use in order to provide the desired recreational experience.**

Additionally, the BLM "Sierra Resource Management Plan" (SRMP), and its ROD released in 2008, documents where and how the agency's Mother Lode Field Office will administer the public lands within the Sierra Resource Management Area. The SRMP states the agency will manage the Merced River, a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), in accordance with the BLM MWSR Management Plan, 1991.

The river will be managed to preserve and protect ORV, and recreational opportunities will be provided as appropriate. Land use conflicts will be examined and resolved in favor of the preservation and enhancement of natural resources. Recreational and other uses will be managed to minimize use conflicts and to maintain a high degree of user satisfaction. The plan states that the agency will "build/support development of a non-motorized trail between Bagby and El Portal" (SRMP 2008).

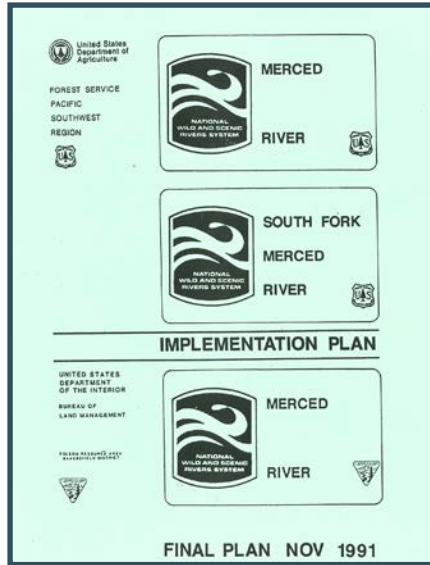


#### BLM PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Since the agency's Wild and Scenic River management plan was adopted, BLM has implemented and currently maintains a trail along the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade within the agency's jurisdiction, which includes nearly 12 river miles of Wild and Scenic river.



## US FOREST SERVICE



APPROXIMATELY  
**8.5 MILES**  
OF POTENTIAL TRAIL IN  
USFS-MANAGED WILD AND  
SCENIC RIVER JURISDICTION

The USFS was established in 1905, with their mission is to sustain healthy, diverse, and productive forests and grasslands for present and future generations.. The BLM/USFS MWSR Implementation Plan guides the management of MWSR segments within BLM and USFS jurisdictions.

The Merced River forms the boundary between the Stanislaus and Sierra National Forest, with both forests assigned jurisdiction of the Merced River corridor. However, as authorized by a special agreement, the SNF administers the MWSR corridor under the jurisdiction of both forests. As written in their implementation plan, the MWSR and its immediate environments will be managed to protect the ORV, while providing opportunities for public recreation based on the classification of each river segment (USDA USFS 2017).

### **SIERRA NATIONAL FOREST**

The SNF manages the following MWSR segments on the main stem and South Fork of the Merced.

#### **On the Merced River main stem:**

##### ***Recreational (12 miles):***

From the boundary of the Stanislaus and SNF and the El Portal Administrative Site, to the BLM/USFS boundary downstream.\*

#### **On the South Fork of the Merced:**

##### ***Wild (3 miles shared):***

From Johnston Creek to Madera/Mariposa County line. SNF administers the south side of the river, and YNP administers the north side.

#### ***Wild (12 miles):***

From YNP/SNF boundary to 1.5 miles east of Hites Cove (two private parcels in segment)

#### ***Scenic (2 miles):***

From 1.5 miles east of Hites Cove, to .5 miles downstream west of Hites Cove

#### ***Wild (3 miles):***

From 1.5 miles downstream west of Hites Cove to .5 miles upstream from confluence with the main stem

#### ***Recreational (.5 miles):***

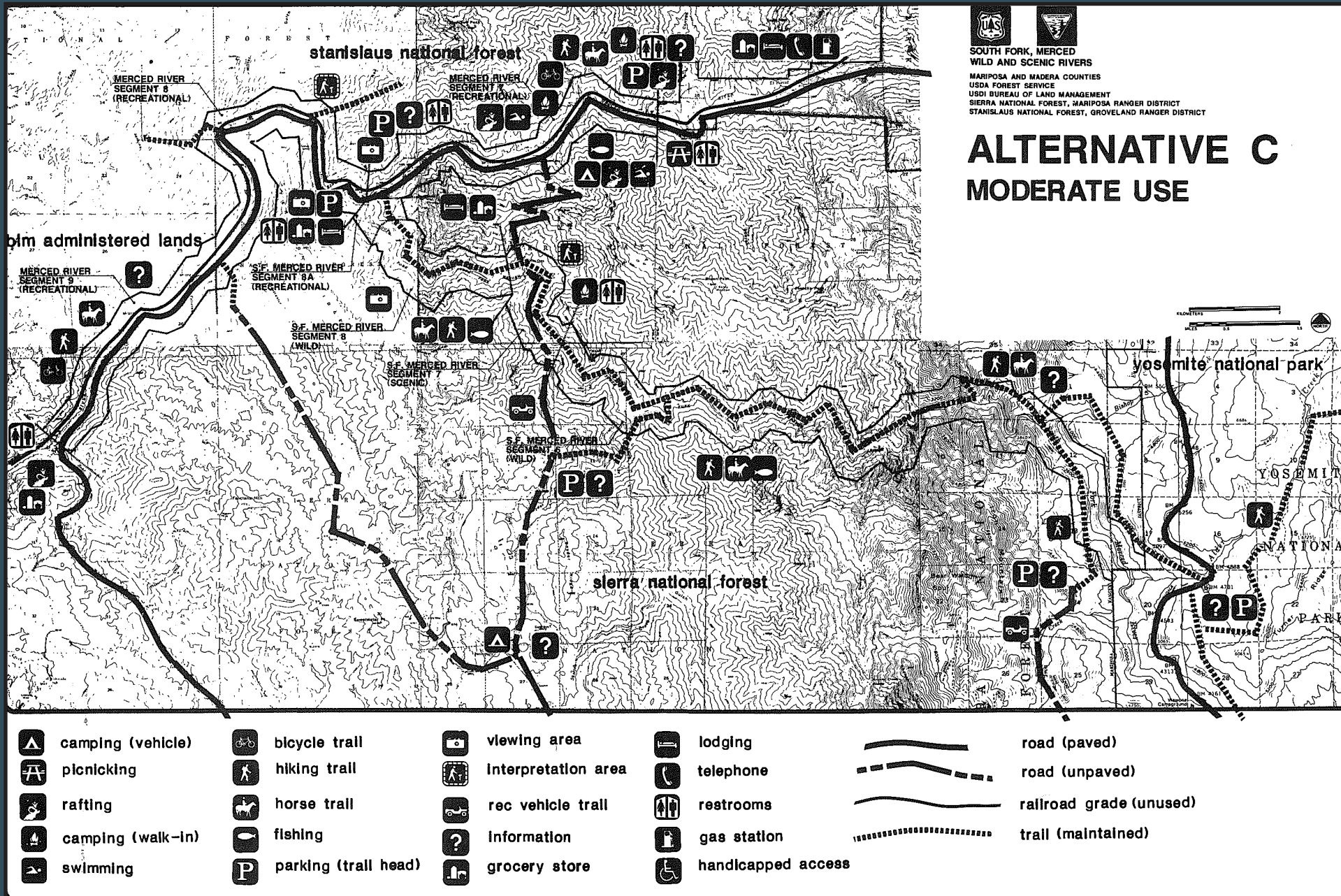
From confluence with the main stem to .5 miles upstream on South Fork

Note that the 12 recreational miles on the main stem of the river include the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade, which is identified in agency planning efforts as the location of the future Merced River Trail. However, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the trail has not yet been formally designated in USFS jurisdiction.

Additionally, though the South Fork includes world-class natural and cultural resources, this portion of the WSR is not directly related to the Merced River Trail project. However, while the South Fork is not specifically addressed in this Vision Plan, the Hites Cove Trail along the South Fork is keenly relevant for several recommendations described in Chapter 3.

In June 2022, SNF released the “Land Management Plan for the Sierra National Forest” (Forest Plan), a tool guiding

\*BLM administers the commercial boating program for that segment and the additional 4 miles downstream under their authority.



#### JOINT US FOREST SERVICE ROLE

The main stem of the Merced River is the boundary between Stanislaus National Forest (north of the river) and Sierra National Forest. Since the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad is on the northern banks of the river, the trail itself is in Stanislaus National Forest. However, existing USFS recreation facilities along the river in the Stanislaus are managed, through agency agreements, by the Sierra, meaning that both forests have responsibilities in implementing the preferred management alternative in the USFS Wild and Scenic River plan.



management and decision-making involved with lands under their jurisdiction. All projects and activities must be consistent with the Forest Plan, which identifies long-term or overall desired conditions and provides general direction for achieving them. The 2022 Forest Plan revises the 1991 version, and focuses on the following purpose and need, with topics of particular relevance to the Merced River Trail **highlighted**:

- Reduce the risk of large high-intensity wildfires to communities and assets; increase the ability to manage wildfires to meet resource objectives, and reduce smoke impacts on communities.
- Restore the resilience of terrestrial, aquatic, and riparian ecosystems to fire, drought, and climate; restore wildlife, fish, and plant habitat and diversity, while reducing the risk of wildfire impacts on species and habitat.
- Provide **sustainable and diverse recreation opportunities**, considering population demographics. Reflect desire of local communities, and **avoid overcrowding and use conflicts to minimize resource damage**.
- **Protect cultural resources**, and update management direction for wilderness and wild and scenic rivers.

The Forest Plan management direction includes protection of free-flowing conditions and the ORV identified for the eligible and existing segments of wild and scenic rivers, and provides guidance for current use and potential projects proposed on SNF land and waterways. Project proposals must first meet the described suitability of an area; if appropriate, relevant design criteria, standards, and guidelines are used. If the project is not consistent with the Forest Plan, it may be redesigned or rejected.

Additionally, proposed recreation-related projects within the SNF, such as the Merced River Trail, should not conflict with the following desired conditions:

- *The design, condition, function, and accessibility of recreation facilities accommodate diverse cultures*
- *Recreation information is current, connecting people to the forest through contemporary means*
- *Recreation opportunities provide a high level of visitor satisfaction, while minimizing user conflicts*
- *Recreation opportunities are balanced with management capacity to manage sites to agency standards*

- *The forest provides a variety of activities with minimal impact on sensitive environments and resources*
- *Visitors can connect with nature, culture, and history through a range of sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities and are committed to resource stewardship*
- *A sustainable system of trails provides access to destinations, and opportunities connecting to a larger trail system; provides linkages from local communities to the national forest; facilities are planned, designed, and managed to be compatible with other resources*

Forest Plan objectives recommend coordinating with local and national partners early in project development to elicit collaborative input on sustainable recreation opportunities, needs, and potential conflicts.

#### **STANISLAUS NATIONAL FOREST**

The USFS completed the STF Land and Resource Management Plan (Stanislaus Forest Plan) and Environmental Impact Statement in October 1991. The STF “Forest Plan Direction,” released in July 2005, presents the current management direction based on the original 1991 Stanislaus Forest Plan, and modified by the current Forest Plan amendments.

The Forest Plan Direction lists many forest goals accompanied with strategies and management practices to achieve them. Relative to the Merced River Trail proposal, the goals associated with wild and scenic rivers; recreation; and aquatic and riparian ecosystems and associated species apply:

#### **Wild and Scenic Rivers**

Manage WSRs and their immediate environments to preserve their free-flowing condition and to protect their ORV. Provide opportunities for public recreation and other resources based on the classification of each river segment.

#### **Recreation**

Provide a wide range of recreation opportunities directed at various experience levels to meet current and projected demand, including campgrounds, hiking trails, picnic areas, off-highway vehicles (OHV) trails, etc; develop recreation management plans for existing and potential areas of concentrated public use; develop and implement programs to inform forest users about recreation opportunities; interpret forest management activities and the forest environment for visitors;

provide OHV recreational opportunities, while protecting wildlife and other resources, including non-motorized recreation.

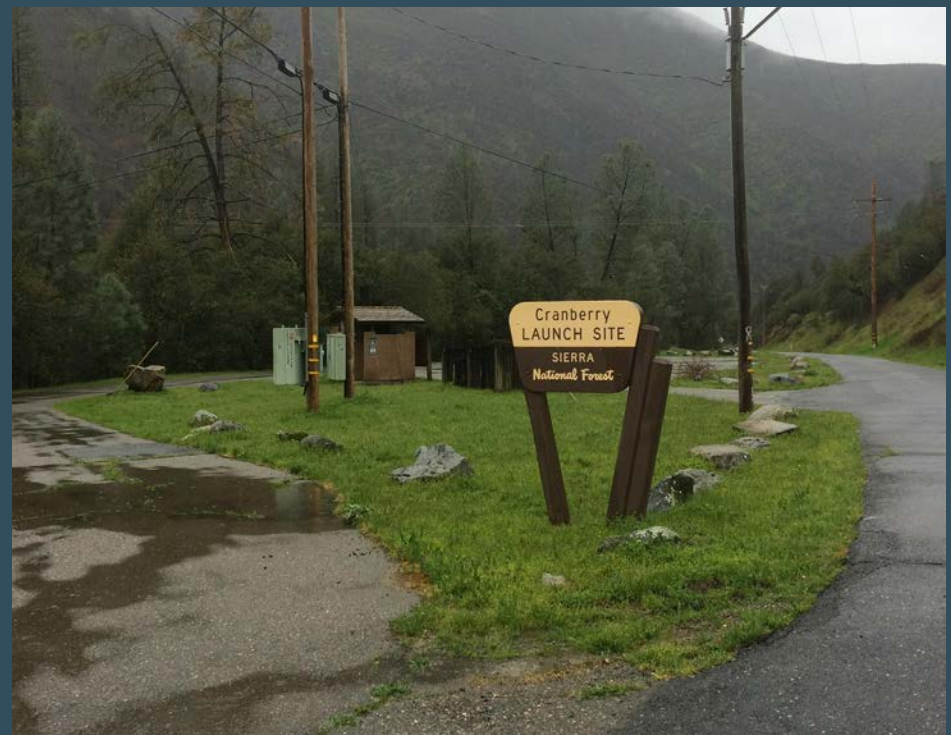
### ***Aquatic, Riparian, and Meadow Ecosystems and Associated Species***

Goals in this topic area include, but are not limited to:

- Maintain and restore water quality to meet goals of the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act, providing water that is fishable, swimmable, and suitable for drinking after normal treatment.
- Maintain and restore habitat to support populations of native and desired non-native plant, invertebrate and vertebrate riparian-dependent species.
- Prevent new introductions of invasive species; work with State and Federal wildlife agencies to reduce impacts to native populations.
- Maintain and restore the distribution and health of biotic communities in special aquatic habitats to perpetuate their unique functions and biological diversity.
- Maintain and restore connections of floodplains, channels, and water tables to sustain diverse habitats.
- Maintain and restore the physical structure and condition of stream banks and shorelines to minimize erosion and sustain desired habitat diversity.



*McClendon's Beach*

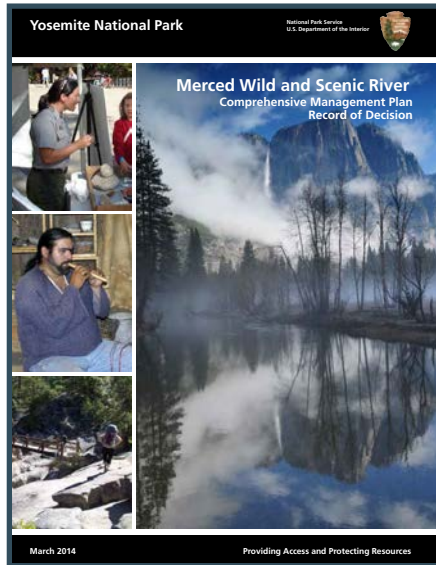


*Cranberry Flat*

### **EXISTING DEVELOPED RECREATION AMENITIES**

In addition to a campground in Jerseydale near the South Fork of the Merced, USFS provides both day use and overnight recreation facilities on both sides of the main stem of the river. Already popular among trail and river users today, these facilities will likely take on higher use and added significance when the full vision for the Merced River Trail is realized.





APPROXIMATELY  
**3 MILES**  
OF POTENTIAL TRAIL IN NPS-  
MANAGED WILD AND SCENIC  
RIVER JURISDICTION

The NPS Organic Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1916, provides fundamental management direction for all units of the NPS. It states the purpose of the National Parks: “...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

In addition to these key management-related statutes, federal management decisions must be consistent with national laws. In accordance with WSRA and NEPA, Yosemite National Park (YNP) released the Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement in February 2014, addressing the MWSR’s 81 miles (South Fork, 22 miles; 3 co-administered with USFS; and 56 miles of main stem) flowing within YNP and the El Portal Administrative Site. The plan is the guiding document to protect and enhance river values and manage use within the river corridor for the next 20 years (NPS 2014).

Prior to the release of the 2014 Final Record of Decision for the Merced Wild and Scenic River Final Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (hereafter, “YNP WSRP”), the NPS had completed two previous draft Merced Wild and Scenic River plans. Both were challenged in federal courts by plaintiffs claiming document deficiencies, including inadequately addressing user capacity, kinds and amount of use in river corridor, river corridor boundary, and ORV protection.

The final planning effort began in 2009, addressing noted deficiencies, and in 2014, the YNP WSR Final

Comprehensive Management Plan and Record of Decision were released. The plan:

- *Establishes the WSR boundaries and segment classifications, and provides for protection of the river’s free-flowing condition*
- *Presents the river’s ORV; documents their condition (water quality and free-flowing condition included).*
- *Identifies management objectives for the river, and specific actions that will be implemented to achieve the objectives*
- *Commits to a program of ongoing studies and monitoring to ensure management objectives are met*
- *Establishes a visitor use/user capacity management program addressing kinds and amounts of public use that the river corridor can sustain while protecting and enhancing ORV*

The YNP WSRP describes and lists ORV according to several river segments in which they occur. YNP administers the following segments of the Merced River and the South Fork Merced River:

**On the Merced River main stem:**

***Wild (37.7 miles):***

Above Nevada Fall to headwaters of the Merced River

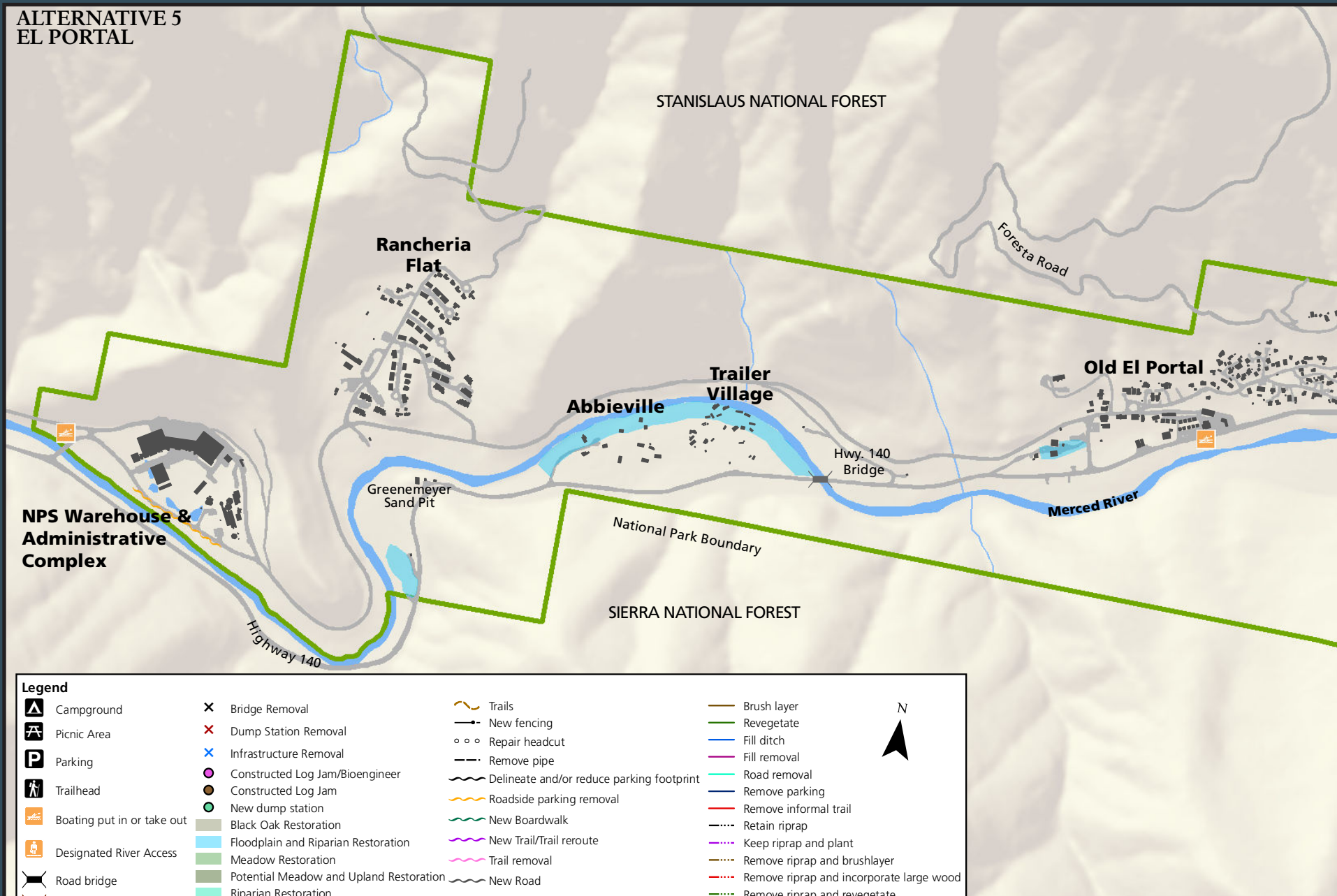
***Recreational (6.11 miles):***

East Yosemite Valley; Top of Nevada Fall to Sentinel Beach

***Scenic (5.71 miles):***

West Yosemite Valley; Sentinel Beach to junction of El Portal and Big Oak Flat Roads

## ALTERNATIVE 5 EL PORTAL



### ALTERNATIVE 5: ENHANCED VISITOR EXPERIENCES AND ESSENTIAL RIVERBANK RESTORATION

The YNP WSRP identified Alternative 5 as the preferred framework for conserving the river's federally designated outstandingly remarkable values. Among the recommendations of that alternative are a new remote visitor parking area in the Abbieville and Trailer Village of El Portal, and a greater emphasis on active, non-automobile modes of travel throughout the park, especially in Yosemite Valley. These NPS recommendations may be important to consider in the context of the Merced River Trail.



**Scenic (6.88 miles):**

Junction of El Portal and Big Oak Flat Roads to western YNP boundary at Parkline

**Recreational (3.13 miles):**

Western YNP boundary at Parkline to El Portal Administrative Site boundary

**On the South Fork of the Merced:**

**Wild (19.96 miles):**

Headwaters above to top of pool at Wawona Impoundment

**Recreational (.05 miles):**

Wawona Impoundment; Top of pool to 200' below dam

**Recreational (4.54 miles):**

Wawona; 200' below Wawona Impoundment to Squirrel Creek

**Wild (2.61 miles):**

Below Wawona; Squirrel Creek to western park boundary

The YNP WSRP described ORV, and listed according to several river segments in which they occur. Though the final route for the Merced River Trail has yet to be determined, the priority route recommended for further exploration in the Vision Plan (Chapter 3) is minimally adjacent to the Merced River in NPS jurisdiction and the YNP WSRP planning area. Accordingly, many of the ORV addressed in that plan primarily occur in locations that are not directly related to the Merced River Trail,

However, many of the ORV identified in the YNP WSRP are directly applicable to the Merced River Trail. These have been **highlighted** below. Examples of identified ORV include:

**Geologic/hydrologic**

Upper MWSR glacially-carved canyon, Vernal-Nevada Fall, the “Giant Staircase,” one of the finest examples in the western U.S. of stair-step river morphology; the MWSR from Happy Isles to the west end of Yosemite Valley provides an outstanding example of a rare, mid-elevation alluvial river; **the boulder bar in El Portal created by changing river gradients, glacial history, and powerful floods, resulting in an accumulation of extraordinarily large, and rare boulder deposits.**



**SPECIFIC AND CONCEPTUAL APPLICABILITY**

Though the YNP WSRP pertains primarily to areas of the Merced watershed that are not directly affected by the Merced River Trail, like Vernal and Nevada Falls, the plan nonetheless has both specific and philosophical applicability to the Vision Plan and the parameters of the future Merced River Trail.

**Cultural**

The Yosemite Valley Archeological District is rich, with linked landscape containing dense concentrations of resources, representing thousands of years of human settlement; the Yosemite Valley Historic District represents a linked landscape of river-related, rare, unique or exemplary contributing resources; the **El Portal Archeological District with dense concentrations of resources that represent thousands of years of occupation and evidence of continuous, far-reaching traffic and trade**; South Fork Merced River has rare archeological features representing indigenous settlement and use along the river at sites with rock ring features; the Wawona Archeological District encompasses clusters of resources spanning thousands of years of occupation; Segment 7 includes the remains of the U.S. Army Cavalry Camp, documenting the unique Yosemite legacy of the African American Buffalo Soldiers; Wawona Historic Resources include a covered bridge, and the National Historic Landmark Wawona Hotel complex.

**Scenic**

The Merced River above Nevada Falls displays exemplary views of serene montane lakes, pristine meadows, slickrock cascades, and High Sierra peaks; Yosemite Valley visitors 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. In the Merced Gorge, the river drops 2,000 feet over 14 miles, cascading under Sierra granite outcrops and domes; South Fork Merced River passes through a vast area of exemplary and wild scenic beauty.

### **Recreational**

The Merced River Above Nevada Falls engages in a variety of river-related activities in an iconic High Sierra landscape, where opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, self-reliance, or solitude shape the experience; Yosemite Valley visitors enjoy a wide variety of river-related recreational activities in the Valley's extraordinary setting along the Merced River.

### **Biological**

#### **Riparian habitat with high biological integrity;**

large Yosemite Valley mid-elevation meadow-riparian

complexes, Sierra sweet bay (*Myrica hartwegii*), a rare plant found on river banks of the South Fork Merced River.

The YNP MWSR Plan/EIS preferred alternative, Alternative 5, includes various actions to protect and enhance ORV through ecological restoration. Restoration of riparian and meadow habitats will protect water quality, scenic views from the river, and traditionally used plant populations. Protection and enhancement of archeological sites and historic districts will allow future generations an opportunity to connect to Yosemite Valley's rich history and heritage."

Though this management framework applies throughout YNP jurisdiction, and as such has limited direct relevance for the Merced River Trail, Alternative 5 does entail several actions for improving the visitor experience that align with or are supported by the Merced River Trail project. These include providing peak season shuttle service to Yosemite Valley from a new El Portal remote parking area, and supporting regional transit service, including a new route from Fresno to Yosemite Valley.



Dayton Daily News

#### **POTENTIAL CONGESTION REDUCTION**

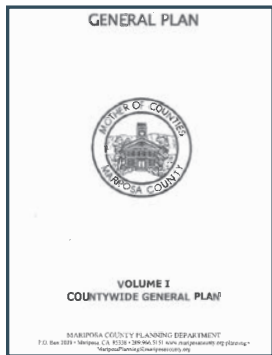
The trail's potential to increase the amount of visitors accessing Yosemite through modes that do not rely on personal vehicles, such as regional transportation or active recreation modes such as long-distance backpacking or bikepacking, could have a positive impact on congestion issues in Yosemite Valley.



## LOCAL PLANNING CONTEXT //

The Merced River Trail takes place almost exclusively on land under federal jurisdiction, and implementation of the Vision Plan's recommendations require close collaboration with federal partners. However, though on federal land, that federal land is entirely within Mariposa County, and those whose lives stand to be the most effected by changes to the trail and its landscape are

### MARIPOSA COUNTY GENERAL PLAN (2006)



The Mariposa County General Plan is the county's basic guiding document, establishing an overarching vision for the community, and a blueprint for policies and other actions to take to achieve that vision over short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons. Though adopted in 2006, the General Plan has undergone multiple revisions since that time to ensure that it reflects current local priorities and values. General Plan policies are organized into 12 elements, several of which have particular relevance for the Merced River Trail, namely:

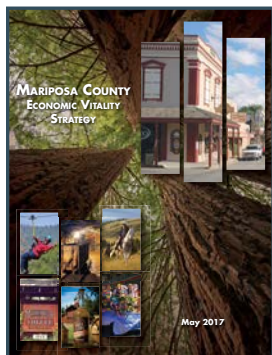
- the **Conservation and Open Space element**, which identifies the Merced River canyon as a priority "scenic resource" to be protected to ensure the County's quality of life and economic viability (Goal 11-1) and specifies environmental conservation, including "ecosystems, plant communities, wildlife habitats, and

Mariposa residents. As such, it is critical to place the Merced River Trail in the context of applicable local planning initiatives, which, like the Vision Plan, reflect the preferences and priorities of Mariposa County residents.

the inherent diversity of both plant and animal species" (Goal 11-2) as a primary concern of the General Plan;

- the **Regional Tourism element**, which calls out the Merced River Trail from Bagby to El Portal as a recreational tourism opportunity, while laying out policies and implementation measures for balancing the trail's economic benefits with natural and cultural resource conservation. These include "Policy 13-1(a)2: The County shall collaborate with the American Indian Council of Mariposa County creating facilities and opportunities to promote public education of Native American cultural traditions and places" and Policy 13-1(b) Maximize public access to public lands consistent with the protection of sensitive natural resources and habitats."

### MARIPOSA COUNTY ECONOMIC VITALITY STRATEGY (2017)



Adopted on July 18, 2017, the Mariposa County Economic Vitality Strategy (EVS) provides a strategic framework to guide community-supported, context sensitive economic development activities throughout Mariposa County. To develop the EVS, Mariposa County staff facilitated a range of meetings and workshops with stakeholders from throughout Mariposa County, including business owners, economic development practitioners, and others involved in the County's economic future.

The resulting recommendations are organized around six strategic initiatives, the first of which, "Promotion and Expansion of the Tourism Sector," directly references the Merced River Trail as an opportunity to "develop and promote activities and places of

interest in each of the county's subareas and communities." (Action 1.2.3). Though participants in the Merced River Trail vision planning process (described in Chapter 2) acknowledged that the trail project would—and indeed, currently does—have an economic benefit to the county, that process revealed concerns about placing the project's economic potential before visitor use issues, like mitigating the trail's impact on the natural environment.

It is noteworthy then, that Objective 1.4 of the EVS is to "ensure that there is adequate capacity to accommodate a growing tourism industry." Though this recommendation doesn't explicitly refer to the capacity of the landscape to absorb more users, this value of the EVS does align with the Vision Plan's essential priorities.

# KEY MARIPOSA COUNTY GENERAL PLAN // MERCED RIVER TRAIL ALIGNMENT

## II. CONSERVATION + OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

**Goal II-1: Conserve the natural and scenic resources, and open space lands to protect and enhance the County's quality of life and character ensuring a viable economy.**

- *Policy II-b: Collaborate with other public and private agencies for conservation management plans and programs.*

## 13. REGIONAL TOURISM ELEMENT

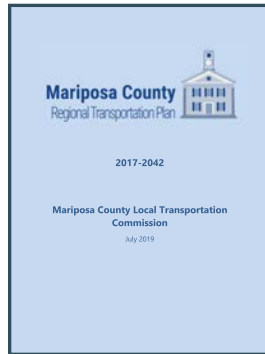
**Goal 13-1: Preserve, protect and enhance regional tourism opportunities and resources.**

- *Policy 13-1a(1): Plan collaboratively with the public land managers for a broad spectrum of regional tourism opportunities.*
- *Policy 13-1a(2): The County shall collaborate with the American Indian Council of Mariposa County creating facilities and opportunities to promote public education of Native American cultural traditions and places.*
- *Policy 13-1b: Maximize public access to public lands consistent with the protection of sensitive natural resources and habitats.*

**Goal 13-3: Increase public access to trails and off-road areas to provide greater opportunities for “in-County” visitor experience.**

- *Policy 13-3a: Work with other land management agencies to establish access routes and trailheads while protecting environmentally sensitive areas.*

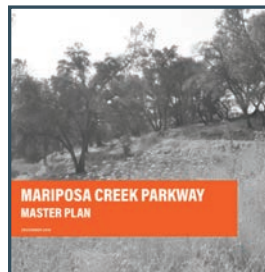
### MARIPOSA COUNTY REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PLAN (2017)



Adopted in 2017, the County's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) is a technical transportation planning document that “documents the transportation policy, actions, and funding recommendations that will meet the short- and long-term access and mobility needs of Mariposa County residents over the next twenty-five years (2017-2042).” This sprawling document addresses a wide range of transportation and mobility issues, including transit, signage and wayfinding, and delays on state highways, which do not pertain to the Merced River Trail.

However, the RTP does call out opportunities in the county for bicycle mobility enhancements, including those with recreational benefits. Here, the document identifies two distinct stretches of the Merced River Trail—between Yosemite and Briceburg, and between Briceburg and Bagby—as “Class I bike paths or trails” capable of serving the regional goals that guide the document.

### MARIPOSA CREEK PARKWAY MASTER PLAN (2019)

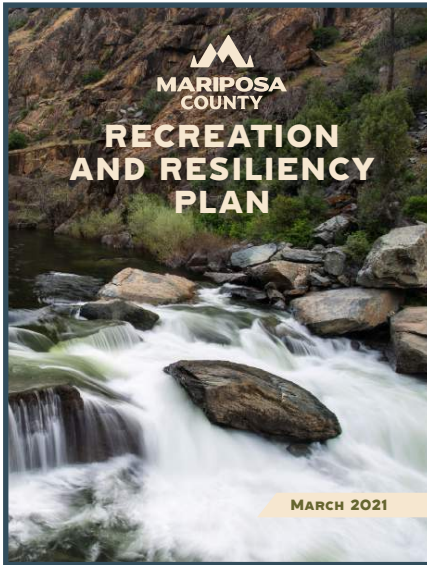


Relying on extensive engagement with a wide variety of perspectives, the Mariposa Creek Parkway Master Plan articulates a vision for a multi-beneficial trail and active transportation facility in the Town of Mariposa. Broadly, the project describes the trail's potential contributions to numerous community objectives, including recreation, ecological restoration, and civic vitality.

Though the Parkway is located in town, one of the plan's basic tenets is that the Parkway has the potential to transform Mariposa into a central hub or “base camp” for regional outdoor activities, and positions the the Parkway as an element in a larger network of non-motorized recreation. This includes potential connections via Bear Creek to the Merced River canyon and the Merced River Trail. This, along with the plan's treatment of the trail as a tool for achieving multiple objectives, including some not related to recreation, are relevant to the Merced River Trail project.



## MARIPOSA COUNTY RECREATION AND RESILIENCY PLAN (2021)



In 2019 the Board of Supervisors authorized using resources from the General Fund to develop a Recreation and Resiliency Plan. This innovative planning effort was intended to use community engagement to identify priority projects for meeting the county's diverse needs for parks, trails, and open spaces, and articulate a strategy for harnessing these recreation projects to promote resiliency throughout Mariposa County's landscapes and communities.

Similar to the Merced River Trail visioning process (detailed in Chapter 2), the Recreation and Resiliency Plan was guided by a steering committee, with community input collected a variety of ways. Namely, the project hosted a series of workshops, facilitated an online survey, and organized interviews with key stakeholders to develop the

plan's framework. That framework starts with a broad vision, identifies shared values for recreation and resiliency, and establishes four basic themes—Park Lands + Open Space, Recreation + Activities, Trails + Connectivity, and Natural Systems—to prioritize recommended projects. Then, the County is divided into four geographic zones, with zone-specific projects recommended based on their relationship to each of the four key themes.

In addition to these zone-specific projects, the Recreation and Resiliency Plan identifies three priority projects that stood out in the planning process as transformative, cross-cutting projects with the highest potential to achieve both the County's recreation and resiliency objectives. Priority projects include a countywide trail network, a community recreation center, and a policy of integrating wildfire planning and practices into recreation.

The Recreation and Resiliency Plan is significant for the Merced River Trail in two ways. First, the trail aligns closely with the plan's framework, especially the aspirations and goals for the Trails + Connectivity theme. For example, this theme's emphasis on using trails to promote connections to the landscape and nurture a stewardship ethic resonates deeply with the outcomes of the Merced River Trail visioning process and, therefore, this plan's framework and recommendations.

Second, the trail is specifically identified as a key component of the countywide trail network recommendation. When the Recreation and Resiliency Plan was being developed, the preferred Merced River Trail route had not yet been identified, so the countywide trail network isn't clear on the Merced River Trail's upstream alignment and terminus. However, that plan does position the MRT as a critical element of the countywide trail network, specifying trail/bridge dimensions in the river corridor and hinting at key resiliency considerations for trails like the MRT, including those related to erosion and wildfire risk reduction.

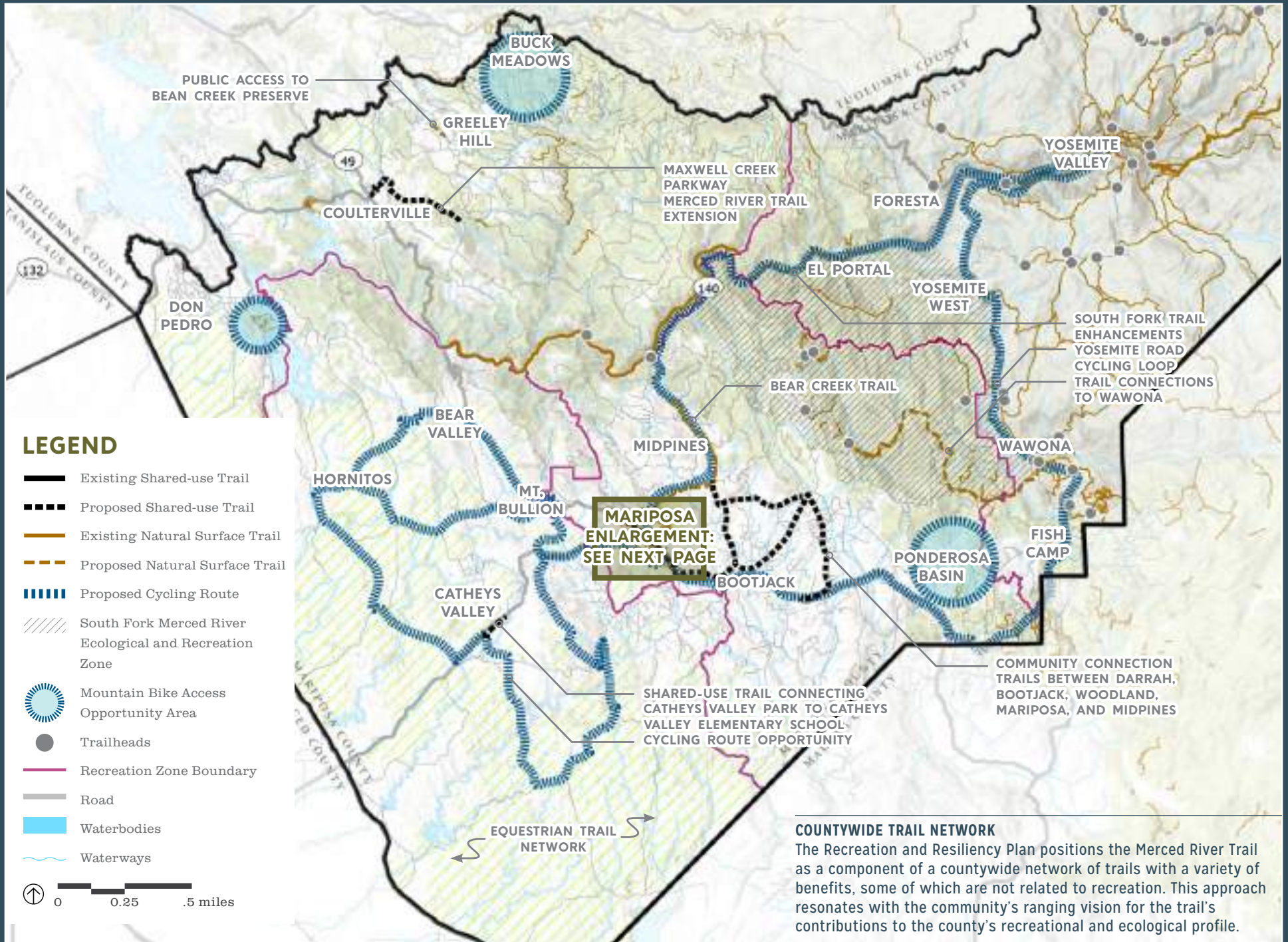
## RECREATION AND RESILIENCY PLAN // TRAILS + CONNECTIVITY

### ASPIRATIONS

*Our interconnected trail system will support wellness, showcase our biodiversity and strengthen relationships with our landscape. We aim to foster healthy living and trail experiences that benefit emotional and physical well-being.*

### GOALS

- ① *Create a countywide network of trails to foster connectivity and promote safer communities in Mariposa County.*
- ② *Strengthen the connection between Mariposans and the natural environment through improved trails.*
- ③ *Foster discovery, use, enjoyment, and stewardship of trails.*



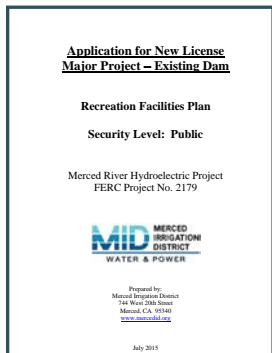


## OTHER PLANNING CONTEXT //

Though federal and local policies provide the primary regulatory parameters and conceptual direction for the Merced River Trail, it is important to acknowledge the trail's relationship to selected regional and state planning and implementation efforts. While a comprehensive listing of the every relevant environmental and recreational planning effort is neither necessary nor possible, the two plans

below stand out as having immediate implications for planning and implementing the Merced River Trail project as described in the Vision Plan.

### MERCED RIVER HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT // MERCED IRRIGATION DISTRICT + FEDERAL ENERGY REGULATORY COMMISSION



APPROXIMATELY  
**6 MILES**  
OF EXISTING TRAIL IN MID  
JURISDICTION

Merced Irrigation District (MID) operates a 103.5 megawatt hydroelectric project, which is located on the Merced River. This project, which includes the New Exchequer Dam, is licensed through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which regulates non-federal hydropower projects. This license expired in February 2014, requiring renewal from FERC and negotiations with affected stakeholders. As part of the license renewal, MID reached an agreement that has a number of implications for recreational and environmental conditions in the Merced River canyon. While Appendix I includes a more detailed analysis of the agreement, perhaps most important is that through this relicensing agreement, MID is committed to measures which will result in the development of a trail upriver from the MID-operated Bagby Recreation Area to the project boundary near Sherlock Creek.

These measures are contingent on completion of several measures by BLM. MID will be responsible to build and maintain a bridge for cyclists and hikers that crosses the Merced River near Sherlock Creek, connecting the Merced River Trail from the north side to the south side, and build a south side trail to Bagby, but only if:

- all lands necessary to build a trail connecting from the BLM lands near Sherlock Creek have legal access (through ownership or easements) that would allow public access to Bagby; and
- BLM constructs a bridge, at no cost to MID, across the North Fork of the Merced River to allow safe public crossing during spring snow melt off and storm events.

BLM will notify MID when these two contingencies have been met, which to date, they have not.

### CALIFORNIA RECREATIONAL TRAILS PLAN PHASE I (2002)



In 2002, the California State Parks Department adopted Phase I of a statewide recreational trails plan, which identifies 12 trail-related goals and lists general action guidelines designed to reach those goals. This effort was intended to be the initial phase of a larger comprehensive trail planning project.

This larger state-led trail planning effort has not yet occurred, and aspects of the first phase are too programmatic or agency-specific to apply to any specific trail project. However, many aspects of the first phase are relevant for the Merced River Trail. In particular, the plan's goal to "Develop and encourage expanded cooperation and collaboration among trail advocates, wildlife advocates, and cultural resource advocates to maximize resource protection, education,

and trail use opportunities" resonates deeply with the community's stated desire to balance appropriate recreational trail use with resource conservation in the Merced River canyon.

This clear overlap between the Merced River Trail and state recreational trail planning guidance is important, because it positions the MRT as a potential priority trail for state-level investment. By aligning with state priorities, the Merced River Trail should be a candidate for funding from applicable state funding sources, such as the Recreational Trail Program, California Conservation Corps support for trail building and maintenance, and other resources available for projects that advance the state's broad agenda for trail implementation.



LAKE MCCLURE

NEW EXCHEQUER DAM

LOWER MERCED RIVER

#### RECREATIONAL MITIGATIONS FOR WATER USAGE

The New Exchequer Dam is licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and includes Protection, Mitigation and Enhancement Measures (PM&E) in its permit to operate its facilities. These PM&E measures have been negotiated with the owners, federal and state natural resources agencies, and relicensing participants (primarily conservation organizations) for final permit conditions.



## PROJECT GENESIS //

Among the first codification of the Merced River Trail in a federal planning document was the US Forest Service's Wild and Scenic River Implementation Plan. As mentioned, that plan was adopted in 1989, and includes the Merced River Trail in its selected preferred alternative. Later, USFS and NPS endorsed the trail concept in their respective jurisdictions through subsequent planning efforts in 1991 and 2014.

Indeed, since the WSR designation, BLM has taken significant action to implement the trail in their jurisdiction—today, that agency's Merced River Recreation Area contains the only formal Merced River Trail miles in the canyon.

However, the first formal depiction of the Merced River Trail was actually even earlier than these federal initiatives. As the Merced River Trail vision planning effort was taking place, Mariposa County staff discovered a map dated 1983, in which a now-defunct advisory committee called the Mariposa County Hiking and Equestrian Trails Advisory Committee illustrated a network of recreational trails throughout the whole county. This map, included as Appendix K, shows a trail along the Yosemite Valley Railroad Grade from Bagby to El Portal, with connections to Yosemite National Park via the Old Coulterville Road.

With nearly 30 years of local attention and federal endorsement, it may seem remarkable that Mariposa County has chosen this particular moment to ramp up its efforts to advance the Merced River Trail. Three factors helped re-energize the trail project and encourage the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors to take action now. They include:

## RECENT RIVER CANYON USE PATTERNS //

Though the public lands in the Merced River have long been a celebrated local resource for Mariposa County residents, the existing recreation amenities have tended to be something of a hidden gem for visitors, most of whom experience the river canyon through the windshields of their cars on the way to Yosemite National Park on Highway 140.

However, as Yosemite has become increasingly crowded, expensive, and with the burgeoning day use reservation system, harder to get into, nearby BLM and USFS recreation areas in the river canyon have grown in popularity. This trend was emphasized during various park closures in recent years, including during federal administrative shut-downs and the COVID-19 pandemic.

While these public lands are intended to be accessed by human users, increased visitation have stressed the limited infrastructure in places like Briceburg and along Incline Road. This has resulted in increased impacts to the river and surrounding landscape, including litter, human waste, and the potential for (and, unfortunately, reality of) increased risk of wildfire from irresponsible recreation activities.

With the underlying causes of these trends, especially enforceable visitation limits in Yosemite and the widespread use of social media, which has limited the extent to which federal land managers can mediate the flow of information about public lands, not likely to dispel, and outdoor recreation only becoming more desirable and accessible in the central valley, California, and globally, it has become increasingly clear that a strategy for mitigating the impacts of

increased visitors in the Merced River canyon is important for conserving its ecological resources. This has led to a growing chorus of voices in Mariposa County interested in a planning initiative that considers these ideas, and helps explain the current emphasis on advancing the trail project.

## LANDSCAPE HEALTH FACTORS //

The Sierra foothills are fire-adapted, which means that intermittent fire is natural, and even necessary for a balanced landscape. However, factors like previous generations' policy of preventing wildfires and the impacts of global climate change have resulted in conditions where unnatural wildfires threaten the health and longevity of the river canyon.

A web of interrelated factors, including drought, warmer summers, and tree mortality have combined to make recent wildfires hotter, bigger, less predictable, and more destructive than the landscape has evolved to accommodate. Beginning roughly with the Merced River Trail vision planning process, for example, Mariposa County alone has suffered from four massive wildfires (Detwiler [2017], Ferguson [2018], Briceburg [2019], Oak [2022]), not including fires exclusively on wildlands (such as the Empire [2017] and Washburn [2022] fires) or fires during that timeframe elsewhere in the region.

In addition to the threat they pose to property and human life, these major wildfires can degrade local and regional ecosystems. While some fire is a critical component of a healthy Merced River watershed, extremely hot and frequent wildfires can damage soil, hampering regrowth and resulting in erosion (especially along steep slopes like those in the

Merced River canyon) that further effects watershed health. As with the impacts from increased visitation, the recent spike in destructive wildfires, the clear imperative for systemic and countywide reactions to it, and the ability for increased planning and innovation in the river canyon via the Merced River Trail helps explain the recent interest in this effort.

### **EXPANDED PLANNING CAPACITY //**

Historically, the Mariposa County Planning Department has focused on “current planning” functions, such as design review, development permits, and code compliance. However, in 2017, the department hired its first Community Design and Development Planner, which expanded its ability to support “long-range planning” initiatives, especially those involving parks, recreation, and trails.

This staff enabled the County to undertake this project, through the Department’s ability to organize and support the Community Working Group, and by pursuing resources to supplement local capacity. Increased staffing allowed the Planning Department to secure support from the National Parks Service’s Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program, which proved valuable to the Vision Planning effort.

Combined with longstanding interest in the Merced River Trail among federal and local agencies, these issues and opportunities catalyzed the Board of Supervisors to accelerate efforts to advance the Merced River Trail. The planning process that followed, described in the following chapter, resulted in a shared vision for the Merced River Trail project, and actions to be taken by the County, federal partners, and local stakeholders to realize it.



*Photo Credit: Marie Edinger/KMPH*

### **DESTRUCTION AND DISRUPTION**

Massive wildfires like the Briceburg Fire (2019), which gets its name from the Briceburg trailhead that provides recreational access to BLM’s Merced River Recreation Area off of Highway 140, have grown hotter, larger, and less predictable in recent years. The trail project provides opportunities to help mitigate and recover from disaster events like this, underscoring its importance and contributing to its timeliness.





**“Trail development should be minimally intrusive. Let the canyon speak for itself. It should be a trail for exercise, beauty and introspection”**

ANONYMOUS COMMENT FROM PROJECT GOALS COMMUNITY SURVEY

PRELIMINARY STAKEHOLDER MEETING // MAY 5, 2018

## 2. VISIONING PROCESS

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***For generations and up to the present day, Mariposa County has been home to a range of opinions on public land and natural/cultural resource management. The Merced River—including the trail, canyon, and overall watershed—belong to everyone, and building consensus among river and trail lovers, many of whom have competing views on the future of the river canyon, is essential to the success of the Vision Plan.***

This project relies on multiple levels of stakeholder engagement to collect and respond to input from diverse perspectives on the river trail.

The process, which unfolded over nearly four years, was guided by a dedicated group of volunteers who provided guidance and recommendations to the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors, and solicited contributions from trail users, wildlife advocates, conservationists, and community builders from throughout Mariposa County. It included a range of opportunities for passionate community members to participate at every point in the visioning process, both formally and informally, across several platforms and through various channels.

It also featured close collaboration with federal partners at the

National Park Service, US Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management, and incorporated subject matter expertise from technical contributors like the Environmental Protection Agency, Headwaters Economics, and the Rails to Trails Conservancy.

Though not all community members will be satisfied with all of its outcomes, the results of the visioning process were shaped by the compromises, trade-offs, and collaboration necessary to build consensus among differing, often opposed, visions for the future of these one-of-a-kind assets. They also present a snapshot of the state of consensus at this moment in time. Likely—indeed, hopefully—the ideas and recommendations that emerged from the Merced River Trail visioning process will change over time and need to be revisited, reexamined, and revised through future community engagement and dialogue.

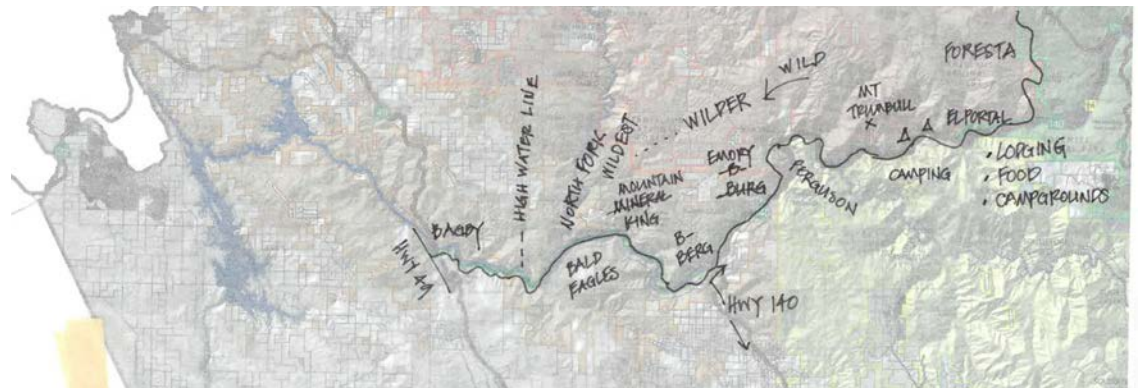


## PRELIMINARY DIALOGUE //

On April 11, 2018, the Planning Department sought direction from the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors on a preliminary strategy for informally engaging with local and agency partners on the Merced River Trail concept. County staff submitted a memo to the Board, which outlined “initial visioning and goal-setting efforts with targeted stakeholders within the community and from federal partners with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS), and National Parks Service (NPS).”

The memo also identifies several community members “that are currently and/or have previously been involved in county trail development” who, through activities like interactive mapping exercises and surveys, could provide early insights to frame later, more formal trail planning work. In addition to frequent consultation and small group conversations with members of this initial trail “brain trust,” approximately 15 members—including community stakeholders and staff from BLM, USFS, and NPS—convened at Pony Espresso in Mariposa for a meeting on May 5, 2018 to produce mental maps of the river corridor and share input on selected images of the existing trail and river corridor.

These preliminary engagement activities were important for building relationships among the federal agencies and local stakeholders, and for laying out a range of issues and opportunities to engage with through a more rigorous community engagement approach. In October 2018, the Planning Department was awarded technical assistance from the NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program to support increased engagement with the project’s federal partners, and in summer 2019, the Board of Supervisors authorized the establishment of the Merced River Trail Community Working Group to function as a formal community sounding board for and driver of the county-led planning effort.



### MENTAL MAPS

Participants in an informal preliminary workshop produced mental maps of the river canyon, which reflected individual respondents’ most memorable areas and experiences along the existing trail.

## MERCED RIVER TRAIL COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP //

To expand on and formalize the community trail planning initiated in 2018, the Board of Supervisors passed Resolution 2019-405 on July 9, 2019, formally establishing the Merced River Trail Community Working Group (CWG) to act as an official 11-member advisory committee to the Board on the trail project, with nine voting members and two non-voting members. Essential to the group's establishment is that it is a formal public advisory committee, and therefore compliant with the Brown and Maddy Acts for public meetings. This means that all of the group's meetings would have to be open to the public, publicly noticed, and documented. This resolution identifies the group's purposes as to:

**formulate, design, implement and participate in a public stakeholder engagement program** to ensure appropriate participation by the development of the Merced River Trail Master Plan;

**provide technical expertise in topic areas germane to the Merced River Trail Master Plan**, including but not limited to: the trail's regulatory context; trail construction and maintenance; existing trail conditions; right of way acquisition; environmental conservation, including wildlife habitat and water quality issues; public health advocacy and promotion; cultural interpretation and conservation; community design and aesthetics; and trail programming;

**support the work of staff and consultants in the conduct of fact finding and data gathering** necessary to (1) identify and negotiate significant coordinative and logistical hurdles in achieving the trail; (2) recommend projects, programs, and policies needed to efficiently implement the community's vision for the trail; and (3) ultimately realize the recommendations contained in the Merced River Trail Master Plan; and

**provide periodic assessment, evaluation of, and feedback** to the Board of Supervisors regarding the success of the Merced River Trail Master Plan.

**Resolution No. 19-405 A RESOLUTION ESTABLISHING THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP TO PROVIDE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE AND GUIDANCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL MASTER PLAN**

**WHEREAS**, the Merced River Trail has been recognized as a critical Class I multi-use active transportation resource in Mariposa's Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan (2011), Regional Transportation Plan (2012), and SR-140 Route Concept Plan; and

**WHEREAS**, the project is also recommended in the community development framework established by the Economic Vitality Strategy (2017); and

**WHEREAS**, the county's participation in the National Parks Service's River, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program has generated substantial content to support a comprehensive planning effort for the Merced River Trail; and

**WHEREAS**, a coordinated and focused strategy is needed to both articulate a shared community vision for the Merced River Trail, and grapple with a range of technical and logistical issues associated with the project; and

**WHEREAS**, dialogue between diverse community stakeholders and expertise from within our community is essential to shaping that community vision and solving complicated questions associated with project implementation.

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Board of Supervisors does hereby establish the Merced River Trail Community Working Group as an advisory body to the Board of Supervisors with purpose, functions, and procedures as described in *Exhibit A* attached hereto and incorporated herein.

**ON MOTION BY** Supervisor Long, seconded by Supervisor Cann, this resolution is duly passed and adopted this 9th day of July, 2019 by the following vote:

**AYES:** SMALLCOMBE, JONES, LONG, CANN, MENETREY

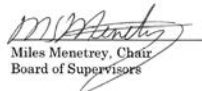
**NOES:** NONE

**EXCUSED:** NONE

**ABSTAIN:** NONE

**ATTEST:**

  
René LaRoche, Clerk of the Board

  
Miles Menetrey, Chair  
Board of Supervisors

The enabling resolution also establishes that CWG members should represent a variety of key perspectives and skillsets, including, but not limited to:

- Bureau of Land Management
- Yosemite National Park
- US Forest Service
- Merced Irrigation District
- Upper Merced River Watershed Council
- Sierra Foothill Conservancy
- Creative Placemaking Strategy Advisory Committee
- Historic Sites & Records Preservation Commission

The resolution also explicitly states that “the committee may call upon representatives of other organizations and the general public as resources on certain topics related to the Merced River Trail, including trail advocates and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.” It also includes a provision for two Ex-Officio (non-voting) members from the Board of Supervisors and county staff as appropriate, and establishes the group's general bylaws.

In September 2019, the Board appointed the first members to the CWG to randomly assigned three-, four-, and five-year terms. The committee has remained at its 11-member capacity, with its first meeting on October 24, 2019. Since then, the group has conducted more than 20 formal public meetings. Finally, it is worth noting that though the original resolution specifies the group's role as working on the Merced River Trail “master plan,” the project's emphasis quickly shifted to developing a “vision plan,” the differences between which are described in Chapter 1.

### **MARIPOSA COUNTY RESOLUTION NO. 19-405**

In July 2019, the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors formally established the Merced River Trail Community Working Group. Subsequent Board actions would appoint members to the group, and receive updates on the project from the group and county staff.



VISIONING FRAMEWORK //

As articulated in the group’s enabling resolution, the CWG’s primary responsibility is to collaborate with county staff to establish and support the implementation of the community engagement work needed to develop a comprehensive, representative, and effective plan for the Merced River Trail. At the group’s early meetings, the CWG helped articulate an overall framework for the engagement and decision-making process, through which community input is collected to make increasingly specific decisions about the project. The sequence of decisions is:

- 1. Vision // what are our highest aspirations for the project?
- 2. Goals // how can we realize that vision?
- 3. Actions // what do we need to do to achieve those goals?

While the substance and specificity of the decisions at each of these milestones differ, the process for dialogue between the CWG and the wider community was consistent throughout. First, the CWG would brainstorm and discuss potential ideas—first vision statements, then goals, then project actions—to collect input on from the public. This step frequently involved precedent research, reading similar plans to get a feel for comparable vision statements, goals and actions, identifying strengths and weaknesses in other projects to influence draft ideas for the Merced River Trail.

Next, after several rounds of discussion and refinement, the CWG would agree on draft materials on which to seek input and direction from the general public. At this point, the CWG would also work with the county staff to devise an appropriate medium in which to share draft materials. After collecting the community’s feedback on draft materials, the CWG—often through a subcommittee—would work to synthesize the feedback that

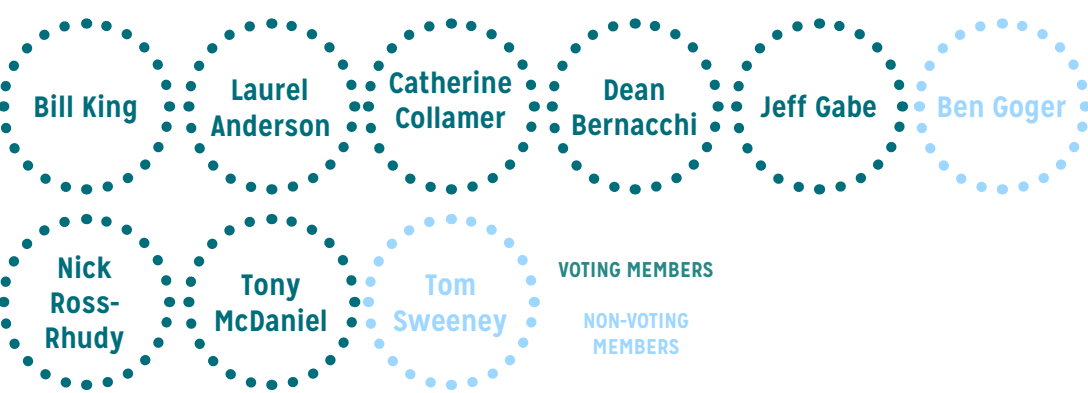
was received, and respond to it by revising the draft materials that were initially shared into a final vision statement, list of project goals, and recommended actions to be voted on and formally adopted by the CWG. Since these discussions took place at noticed public meetings, members of the public could and often did participate in these initial discussions at each stage in the visioning effort.

MERCED RIVER TRAIL COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP

VOTING MEMBERS



FORMER MEMBERS

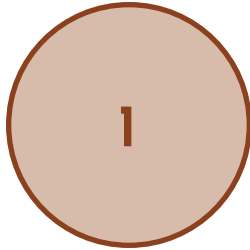


VISIONING FRAMEWORK

The trail visioning process is based on dialogue between the Community Working Group and the community at large, through which increasingly specific decisions are made. Each step relies on the decisions made at the previous step in the process.

## 1. VISION

WHAT ARE OUR HIGHEST ASPIRATIONS FOR THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL?

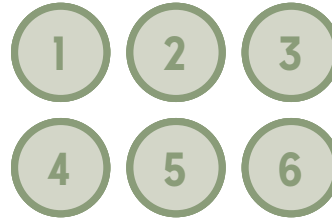


### EXAMPLES

- “THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL WILL BE A REGIONAL RESOURCE TO INCLUDE RECREATIONAL ACCESS AND REFLECT THE COMMUNITY’S DESIRE FOR A TRAIL THAT INCLUDES THE AREA’S HISTORY, CULTURE, AND ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES.”
- “THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL WILL BE A HIGH-QUALITY MULTI-USE TRAIL IN THE MERCED RIVER CANYON THAT PROMOTES THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE PEOPLE, CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SERVING AS A PROTOTYPE FOR A COMPREHENSIVE COUNTY-WIDE TRAIL NETWORK IN MARIPOSA COUNTY.”

## 2. GOALS

HOW CAN WE REALIZE THAT VISION?



### EXAMPLES

- MINIMIZE CONFLICTS BETWEEN HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN USERS OF THE MERCED RIVER CORRIDOR
- EMPHASIZE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE NARRATIVES ABOUT THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE MERCED RIVER IN ANY INTERPRETIVE FEATURES
- ENSURE THAT ANY CHANGES OR ADDITIONS TO THE RIVER CANYON ARE APPROPRIATELY SCALED AND DESIGNED TO THE NATURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY EXIST

## 3. ACTIONS

WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO ACHIEVE THESE GOALS?



### EXAMPLES

- PRESERVE A MINIMUM IMPACT AESTHETIC IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL, INCLUDING THE USE OF NATURAL MATERIALS AND DRY-STONE MASONRY TECHNIQUES THAT ARE CONSISTENT WITH THE HISTORIC TRAILS OF THE AREA.
- MAP WILDLIFE HOTSPOTS AND DEVISE APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE MEASURES TO MINIMIZE THE IMPACT OF TRAIL USE ON WILDLIFE, ESPECIALLY AT THESE LOCATIONS
- MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL VOLUNTEERS IN TRAIL PROJECTS



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES //

Throughout the visioning process, the CWG recommended and helped implement several events to promote, publicize, and make accessible the engagement activities for each milestone. Central to the engagement program was the Community Speaker + Engagement Series, which initially consisted of at least four events intended to provide a range of compelling, accessible opportunities to participate in the visioning process, while deepening the community’s knowledge of and appreciation for the trail and river corridor’s ecological, historical, cultural, and social contexts.

Each event in the initial series would begin with a presentation or guided hike led by a local expert in a topic germane to the river canyon and/or trail—Indigenous sense of place, botanical character, wildlife habitat, and mining, rail, timber, and ranching history. Then, the event’s program would shift to feature an activity to provide input on and discuss the Vision Plan and the draft materials provided by the CWG. Initially, the events were intended to take place in person. However, while the first event did occur in person, most subsequent events did not because of restrictions on public meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, most events took place as virtual/teleconference meetings. What follows is a summary of each event and the decisions made throughout the visioning process.

SPEAKER SERIES //

OPEN HOUSES //

SURVEYS

- February 20, 2020  
Native American Sense of Place and Project Vision
- December 14, 2020  
Ecological Identity and Project Goals
- March 29, 2021  
Conservation and Advocacy History and Open House

- January 7, 2021  
El Portal Open House (online)
- March 29, 2021  
Community Open House (online)
- June 16, 2021  
Midpines Open House (in person)

- December 2020-March 2021  
Project Goals Community Survey
- September-December 2021  
Project Actions Community Survey

ADOPTED  
MERCED RIVER TRAIL  
VISION STATEMENT

*The Merced River Trail will manifest our community’s appreciation of our county’s ecological, scenic, and cultural resources along the Wild and Scenic Merced River.*

*It will address the growing needs for education, access to recreation, and regional economic development with the imperative for conserving the canyon’s many remarkable resources.*

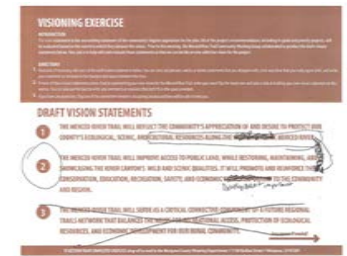
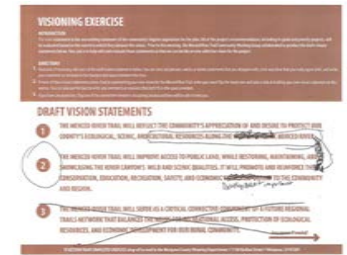
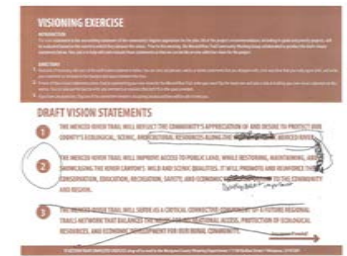
*The trail will serve as a central connective component of an existing and future network of trails.*



several CWG meetings prior the February event, members brainstormed and refined three draft vision statements, which were presented to participants at the February event. The activity asked participants to mark up the vision statements—circle, cross out, underline, rewrite or otherwise engage with—to develop a vision statement that resonated with them. The three draft vision statements that were presented were:

- *The Merced River Trail will reflect the community's appreciation of and desire to protect our county's ecological, scenic, and cultural resources along the Wild and Scenic Merced River.*
- *The Merced River Trail will improve access to public land, while restoring, maintaining, and showcasing the river canyon's Wild and Scenic qualities. It will promote and reinforce the conservation, education, recreation, safety, and economic values important to the community and region.*
- *The Merced River Trail will serve as a critical connective component of a future regional trails network that balances the needs for recreational access, protection of ecological resources, and economic development for our rural community.*

While some participants completed the exercise on site, others preferred to share their input on the vision statement to CWG members and staff in conversations after the event. The exercise was also made available on the County's website for community members to complete and return to the Planning Department. Based on input received through these channels, the CWG developed a revised vision statement that synthesized key phrases and concepts from each of the three draft statements, while adding language to what would become the adopted Merced River Trail Vision Statement.



**VISIONING EXERCISE**  
Community members comment on their highest aspirations for the Merced River Trail to help establish the vision for the trail.

The community presenter for the first installment in the Community Speaker + Engagement Series was Irene A. Vasquez, an expert in eco-cultural uses of native plants and then secretary for the American Indian Council of Mariposa County (Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation). Ms. Vasquez presented on the river canyon's place in generations of Indigenous history, sharing archival photos and emphasizing the importance of projects like the Merced River Trail on addressing issues faced by contemporary Indigenous communities, including public health vulnerabilities and the prison industrial complex. The event was held at the El Portal Community Hall, with over 50 people estimated to have been in attendance.

After this presentation, participants completed an exercise to provide input on the project vision for the Merced River Trail project. Following the process outlined earlier in this chapter, the exercise was developed by the CWG as a prompt for participants to react and engage with three draft vision statements. For



*"I like all 3 vision statements; do we need just one? [We should] weave all those great concepts into the final vision statement."*

ANONYMOUS COMMENT FROM  
VISION STATEMENT ACTIVITY



**DIALOGUE #1: NATIVE  
AMERICAN SENSE OF PLACE**  
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, community members gathered for an in-person event to both learn about and share their perspectives on the Merced River canyon, watershed, and trail at the first Community Speaker + Engagement Series event.





- *Protect the natural, historic, and cultural resources in the river canyon.*
- *Enhance watershed health, wildlife, and wildlife habitat as a principle of trail planning, implementation, and use.*
- *Promote the Merced River Trail as an integral component of a broader California Regional and State-wide trail system.*
- *Support long term resource management objectives for public land along the Merced River.*
- *Develop a trail that improves access to a wide range of appropriate outdoor experiences.*
- *Support education and research activities that increase knowledge about the importance of the river canyon as a cultural resource and wildlife corridor.*
- *Improve public health through increased access to nature-based recreation in the Merced River canyon.*
- *Strengthen the community's connection to the natural ecosystems of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.*
- *Support the regional economy by stimulating businesses, support services, and other ventures geared towards outdoor recreation.*
- *Prioritize projects for the benefit of wildlife, ecosystem health, and improvement of the current natural conditions.*

---

*“It will take both long-term vision and short-term goals to accomplish this project and make it available for immediate use and as a future resource.”*

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ANONYMOUS COMMENT FROM  
PROJECT GOALS COMMUNITY  
SURVEY

The COVID-19 pandemic began shortly after the February 2020 meeting, forcing the visioning work to pause and the CWG to evaluate options for safely and productively continuing the engagement program. After deliberating for several virtual CWG meetings, it was decided to continue the Community Speaker + Engagement Series, while adapting the program to an online format.

Additionally, the CWG spent the intervening seven months developing a list of draft goals for the trail project to seek input from the community through the online format. At the public CWG meetings when the draft goals were developed, it was emphasized that the draft goals needed to align with the adopted vision statement. Ultimately, the CWG voted to share these draft goals with the community for further online discussion and engagement:

- *Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.*

The community presenter for the December event was Rob Grasso, who leads the Aquatic Wildlife Restoration program in Yosemite National Park, restoring endangered amphibians and rare turtles. Rob provided an overview of some key wildlife species in the Merced River canyon, and identified several important wildlife- and habitat-related issues to consider through the visioning process. The event was an online meeting that took place over the GoToMeeting platform, and had approximately 50 participants.



After Mr. Grasso's presentation, county staff introduced an online survey where community members could provide input on the project's goals. Meeting participants were oriented to the survey, and a link to the survey was shared through the meeting's chat feature. The link was also emailed out and made available on a variety of online channels.

## EL PORTAL OPEN HOUSE // JANUARY 7, 2021

At this online Open House-type event, members of the Merced River Trail Community Working Group, Mariposa County staff, and District I Supervisor Rosemarie Smallcombe met with members of the El Portal, Foresta, and Incline communities to hear input, suggestions, and ideas for the Merced River Trail. The open house took place over the GoToMeeting platform, and had approximately 50 participants.

Many participants expressed concerns over the potential impact that a trail going through Foresta and El Portal could have on the fabric and livability of these communities. Similar sentiments had been expressed both by members of the community and of the working group at previous CWG meetings, and had been expressed in responses to the then-open online survey on the project's goals. Other participants expressed concerns over the potential impacts to wildlife habitat that expanded trail use could have.

### PROJECT GOALS SURVEY

The CWG sought input on eleven initial draft project goals through an online survey. The survey used conditional formatting to ask respondents questions based on their responses to preceding questions in the survey.

1

Merced River Trail // Project Goals

**Draft Project Goals:**

What are the most important goals for the Merced River Trail? Tell us how you feel through the below survey questions.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** For each draft goal, select the choice that most closely captures how you feel about it. Later, we will ask you to rank the draft goals that you think are most important.

1. Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.

I disagree with this goal.   This goal isn't all that important.   Meh, I don't really care about this.   I like this goal a lot!   This should be a priority goal.

RESPONDENTS WERE FIRST ASKED TO INDICATE HOW IMPORTANT THEY VIEWED EACH OF THE ELEVEN INITIAL DRAFT GOALS.

2

Merced River Trail // Project Goals

**Your Priority Goals:**

You identified the following draft goals as being priorities. Before you rank them, do you have any comments or changes you would make to these draft goals? If so, you can enter it into the text box under each of your priority draft goal. If you still see these as priorities, you can move on to the next question. You can also make changes to your responses above before moving on.

Rank your priority goals in order of how important they are.

Example: Goal 3, Goal 1, Goal 9, Goal 5

IF A RESPONDENT INDICATED THAT THEY AGREED OR STRONGLY AGREED WITH A DRAFT GOAL, THE SURVEY OFFERED AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRIORITIZE PREFERRED GOALS BY RANKING THEM.

3

Merced River Trail // Project Goals

**YOUR LEAST IMPORTANT GOALS:**

You indicated that the following draft goals were not important to you. If you'd like to provide any additional comments on these draft goals, please share them below.

Back   Next

Page 4 of 6

IF A RESPONDENT INDICATED THAT THEY DISAGREED WITH A DRAFT GOAL, THE SURVEY OFFERED AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL COMMENTS SPECIFIC TO THAT DRAFT GOAL.

4

Merced River Trail // Project Goals

**Final Thoughts?**

Are there any goals that you think are missing?

Add a Comment Here...

Is there anything else you want to share? If you have any additional feedback, it will be helpful as we continue to work towards a plan for the Merced River Trail. If not, you can click on the button below to finish up the survey.

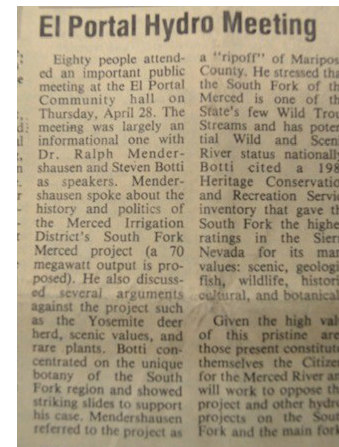
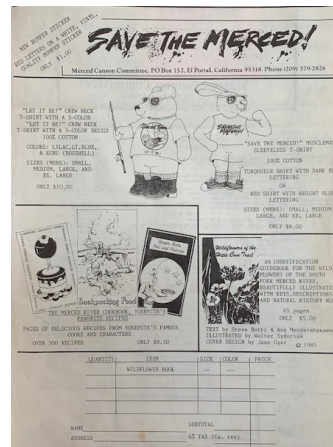
Add a Comment Here...

THE SURVEY CONCLUDED WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADD NEW GOALS OR PROVIDE GENERAL FEEDBACK AND INPUT.



At the March 2021 event, Ralph Mendershausen discussed the history of community leadership and river conservation initiatives in the watershed, and reflected on their significance for the current visioning effort. As both a longtime Mariposan and founding member of the Merced Canyon Committee, Mr. Mendershausen drew on his extensive experience in helping secure Wild and Scenic designation for the river from its headwaters in Yosemite National Park to above Lake McClure. The event took place over the GoToMeeting platform, and had approximately 50 participants.

An open house-style discussion followed, where county staff and CWG members emphasized that, based on feedback received to that point from residents of El Portal and Foresta, the adopted Vision Plan would assuredly not recommend a trail alignment passing through those communities. Participants were also reminded to complete the online survey and encourage others to do so.



### DIALOGUE #3: CONSERVATION AND ADVOCACY HISTORY

This presentation included archival photos documenting the history of grassroots work of local residents to organize, advocate for, and achieve river conservation victories, including securing Wild and Scenic River status.



## MIDPINES OPEN HOUSE // JUNE 16, 2021

After being open for nearly 10 weeks and receiving 252 responses, the online survey to collect input on the project goals was closed so that the CWG could begin interpreting the results. Over the next four months, a subcommittee of CWG members met six times to analyze and synthesize responses and revise the project's goals accordingly. The subcommittee included Ralph Mendershausen, Michael Martin, Nick Ross-Rhudy, and Jeff Gabe.

First, comments were coded for whether they were actionable for a specific draft goal, more general and applicable to multiple draft goals, or not related to the draft project goals. The subcommittee then modified each draft goal—first individually, then collaboratively—in response to both the actionable specific and general comments in the survey responses. The result was a significantly different list of goals than the initial draft list, which was adopted by the CWG at the April 15, 2021 meeting.

The adopted project goals were the focus of the Midpines Open House. On June 15, California transitioned to beyond the blueprint framework, which made it possible for community members to come together in person for an event at the Midpines Community Hall. The event was structured as an open house to share the results and outcomes of the recent community survey on the project's goals. Members of the Merced River Trail Community Working Group and County staff were on hand to discuss how community feedback informed the adopted project goals, and provided updates on the next steps in the visioning process.

The event had approximately 15 participants. In addition to this open house presentation, the goals and a summary of the differences between them and the initial draft goals, were made available on the Mariposa County website and distributed via email and other online platforms. Based on the survey results, the CWG voted to adopt the following goals:

1. **Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent and surrounding communities.**
2. **Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.**
3. **Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon.**
4. **Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation.**
5. **Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized, recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses.**
6. **Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County.**
7. **Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.**
8. **Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities.**

### PROJECT GOAL REVISIONS

Based on the input received through the online survey and during the discussions with the community in this phase of the project, the initial draft goals were modified in various ways prior to being adopted by the Community Working Group.

**252**  
SURVEY RESPONSES

**11**  
INITIAL DRAFT GOALS

**2**  
DRAFT GOALS  
ELIMINATED

**3**  
DRAFT GOALS  
INTEGRATED

**2**  
NEW GOALS  
DEVELOPED

**8**  
FINAL GOALS  
ADOPTED

## INITIAL DRAFT GOAL

## ADOPTED GOAL

## INITIAL DRAFT GOAL

## ADOPTED GOAL

1

*Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.*

**Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.**

8

*Improve public health through increased access to nature-based recreation in the Merced River canyon.*

ELIMINATED; NOT A POPULAR GOAL

2

*Protect the natural, historic and cultural resources in the river canyon.*

**Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon.**

9

*Strengthen the community's connection to the natural ecosystems of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.*

ELIMINATED; KEY TOPICS INTEGRATED INTO UPDATED GOAL #7

3

*Enhance watershed health, wildlife, and wildlife habitat as a principle of trail planning, implementation and use.*

**Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation.**

10

*Support the regional economy by stimulating businesses, support services, and other ventures geared towards outdoor recreation.*

ELIMINATED; NOT A POPULAR GOAL

4

*Promote the Merced River Trail as an integral component of a broader California Regional and State-wide trail system.*

**Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County.**

11

*Prioritize projects for the benefit of wildlife, ecosystem health, and improvement of the current natural conditions.*

ELIMINATED; KEY TOPICS INTEGRATED INTO UPDATED GOAL #3

5

*Support long term resource management objectives for public land along the Merced River.*

ELIMINATED; KEY TOPICS INTEGRATED INTO UPDATED GOAL #3

N1\*

-

**Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent and surrounding communities.**

6

*Develop a trail that improves access to a wide range of appropriate outdoor experiences.*

**Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized, recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses.**

N2\*

-

**Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities.**

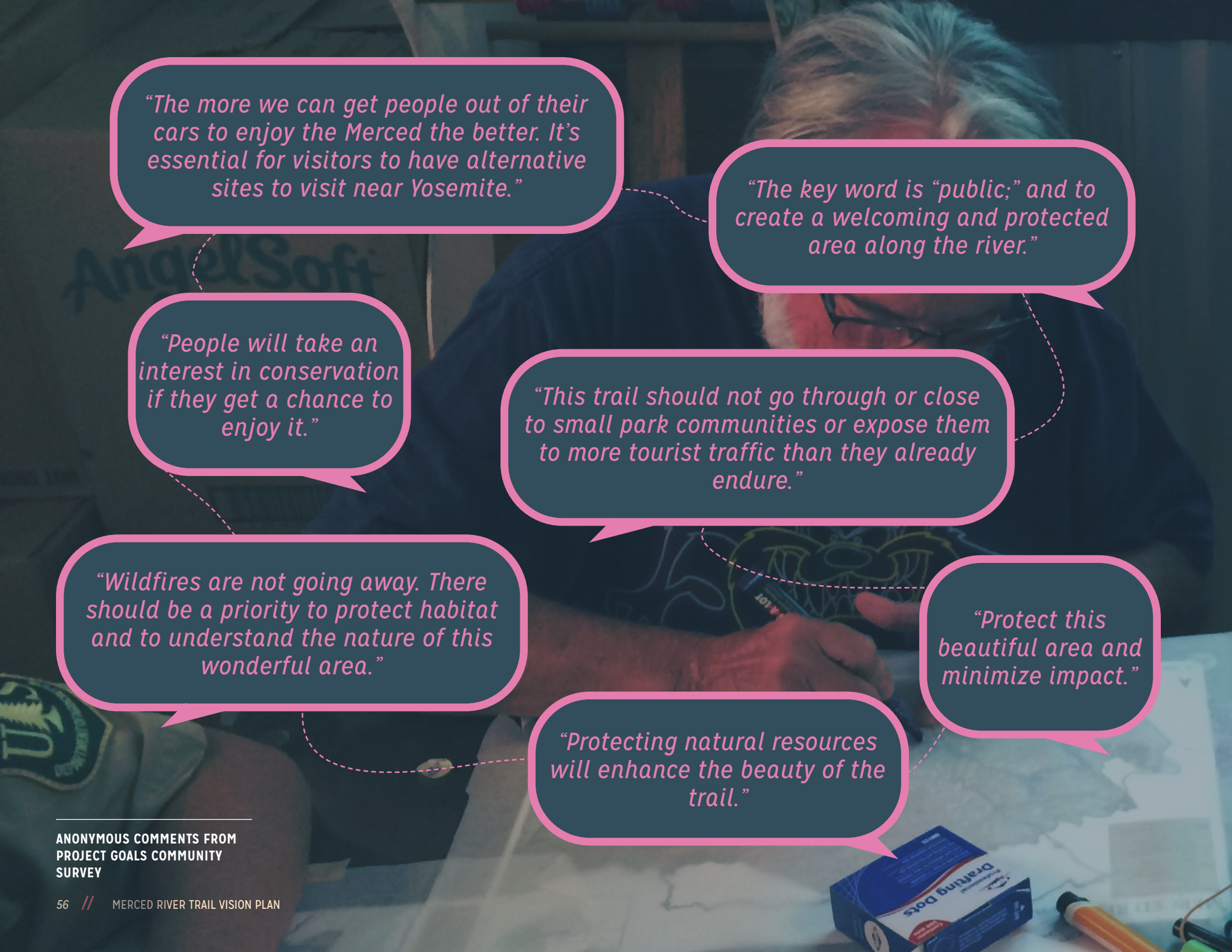
7

*Support education and research activities that increase knowledge about the importance of the river canyon as a cultural resource and wildlife corridor.*

**Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.**

\* NEW GOAL DRAFTED IN RESPONSE TO INPUT FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY





*"The more we can get people out of their cars to enjoy the Merced the better. It's essential for visitors to have alternative sites to visit near Yosemite."*

*"The key word is "public;" and to create a welcoming and protected area along the river."*


*"People will take an interest in conservation if they get a chance to enjoy it."*

*"This trail should not go through or close to small park communities or expose them to more tourist traffic than they already endure."*

*"Wildfires are not going away. There should be a priority to protect habitat and to understand the nature of this wonderful area."*

*"Protect this beautiful area and minimize impact."*

*"Protecting natural resources will enhance the beauty of the trail."*



*"Educating the general public on appropriate use of a trail system, and care of our natural resources is most important. This should be a priority so that all who use the trail system take personal responsibility for its care."*

*"For the long-term preservation of the canyon and trail, the community needs to support it."*

*"Enhancing watershed health, wildlife and wildlife habitat should not be sacrificed for development."*

*"Anything to keep it clean + quiet, while being used + enjoyed."*

*"Year-round access is important because of it's excellent climate and favorable winter temperatures. "*

*"The river canyon is rich in historic and cultural resources that are important to preserve."*

*"This trail could serve as an example of bringing people closer to their surroundings."*

*"By having a plan we can beat the social trails which often fail our public interests."*



## PROJECT ACTIONS SURVEY // SEPTEMBER 9, 2021

With the CWG having adopted the project's goals, their emphasis shifted to developing a series of draft actions to share with the community and on which to receive feedback and input. For the purposes of the trail visioning work, actions refer to potential steps that can be taken to achieve the adopted goals. Accordingly, the committee put forth actions that specifically align with each of the project's eight goals—in other words, each action was intended to correspond to a specific goal.

The CWG discussed and crafted draft actions for several meetings. While some draft actions were developed anew during this phase, many had emerged and been recorded during previous phases of the visioning process. For example, while the CWG was evaluating comments proposed in the project goals survey, many of the community's comments aligned more closely with project actions rather than goals. These were saved and revisited during the project actions, as were potential actions that arose during previous CWG deliberations over the draft vision statement and draft goals.

Ultimately, the CWG voted to put forth a list of 29 draft actions for the community to engage with and react to through an online survey that went live on September 9, 2021. For each goal, the CWG proposed at least two draft actions, and most goals had at least three associated draft actions. The initial draft actions and the goals with which they were associated are on pg. 49-50.

The survey was structured for participants to evaluate draft actions based on their perceived utility for achieving the goal to which they relate. For each draft action, survey respondents could indicate whether they thought it would be effective, not effective, or simply not important to the project. Each prompt also allowed participants to write in any additional comments or input on the CWG's draft actions.

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #1**

Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent and surrounding communities.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta and follows existing public rights of way to the greatest extent possible.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Explore the potential for existing public transportation to support the community's priorities for the Merced River Trail.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 4 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #6**

Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Reservoir Trail System.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Investigate, research and advance efforts to implement the historic Sherlock Creek trail from Ethel May Mine to West Whitlock Mining Area.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 3:**

Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal agencies for connection of "Concept Trail" in Merced Brigation District Recreation Plan with MRT from Bagby to Briceburg.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 4:**

Continue to collaborate with Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 9 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #2**

Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 3:**

Continue efforts to acquire public access to and remediate the Miller Gulch site.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 4:**

Work with the USFS (Stanislaus National Forest) to identify, and include the RR Grade trail section between BLM land and YNP as a designated Forest Trail.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 6 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #5**

Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized, recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Query and review agency regulations regarding management of public access on their portions of the trail to be summarized and made available to MRT users, community, and interested parties.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Seek written input from equestrians on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size sanitation, and signage.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 3:**

Develop and publish a use plan for major MRT river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 8 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #3**

Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River Canyon.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Continue a regular program of community information about matters relevant to these aspects of the canyon and determine the best means for their selection, dissemination, accessibility, and collection.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as signage or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate those sites.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 3:**

Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 4:**

Establish an MRT support group of informed local people that will visit the trail with some regularity to see and note its quality and use.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 5:**

Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 10 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #7**

Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River Canyon.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Connect people to the area's unique conservation values with signage or kiosks that minimize impact to natural resources and scenic qualities.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Maximize local volunteers in MRT projects.

Not Important Not Effective Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 10 of 12

**Merced River Trail Project Actions**

**Goal #4**

Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation.

Click the button that best reflects how you feel about each draft action. You can write in any additional thoughts below.

**Draft Project Action 1:**

Identify opportunities to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, contiguous species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

**Draft Project Action 2:**

Map wildlife use patterns and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to minimize impact of trail use on wildlife, especially at these locations.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

**Draft Project Action 3:**

Design and maintain trail to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with federal land management requirements for natural surfacing.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

**Draft Project Action 4:**

Work with agency partners to develop a strategy, including physical elements and enforcement protocols, for ensuring that the trail's prohibition on non-motorized use is strictly maintained.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

**Draft Project Action 5:**

Study the existing capacity of current trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

**Draft Project Action 6:**

Evaluate future mitigation needs for law enforcement and fire issues, human waste, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services.

Not Important   Not Effective   Effective

Do you have any other thoughts about the actions for this goal? Are there any other actions that you think will be effective at achieving this goal?

Back Next Page 7 of 12

## PROJECT ACTIONS SURVEY

After the project goals survey was completed, the CWG sought community input on potential actions for advancing the adopted project goals.

1. **Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent and surrounding communities.**
  - *Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta and follows existing public rights of way to the greatest extent possible.*
  - *Explore the potential for existing public transportation to support the community's priorities for the Merced River Trail.*
2. **Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.**
  - *Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment.*
  - *Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek.*
  - *Continue efforts to acquire public access to and remediate the Miller Gulch site.*
  - *Work with the USFS (Stanislaus National Forest) to identify, and include the RR Grade trail section between BLM land and YNP as a designated Forest Trail.*
3. **Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon.**
  - *Continue a regular program of community information about matters relevant to these aspects of the canyon and determine the best means for their selection, dissemination, accessibility, and collection.*
  - *Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as signage or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate those sites.*
  - *Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges.*
  - *Establish an MRT support group of informed local people that will visit the trail with some regularity to see and note its quality and use.*

4. **Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation**
  - *Identify opportunities to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, contiguous species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies.*
  - *Map wildlife use patterns and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to minimize impact of trail use on wildlife, especially at these locations.*
  - *Design and maintain trail to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with federal land management requirements for natural surfacing.*
  - *Work with agency partners to develop a strategy, including physical elements and enforcement protocols, for ensuring that the trail's prohibition on non-motorized use is strictly maintained.*
  - *Study the existing capacity of current trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads.*
  - *Evaluate future mitigation needs for law enforcement and fire issues, human waste, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services.*
5. **Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized, recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses.**
  - *Query and review agency regulations regarding management of public access on their portions of the trail to be summarized and made available to MRT users, community, and interested parties.*
  - *Seek written input from equestrians on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage.*
  - *Develop and publish a use plan for major MRT river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments.*



**6. Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County.**

- *Advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Reservoir Trail System.*
- *Investigate, research and advance efforts to implement the historic Sherlock Creek trail from Ethel May Mine to West Whitlock Mining Area.*
- *Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal agencies for connection of “Concept Trail” in MID Recreation Plan with MRT from Bagby to Briceburg.*
- *Continue to collaborate with Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions.*

**7. Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community’s connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.**

- *Connect people to the area’s unique conservation values with signage or kiosks that minimize impact to natural resources and scenic qualities.*
- *Maximize local volunteers in MRT projects.*

**8. Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities.**

- *Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the financial and technical resources necessary for the trail’s long-term success.*
- *Construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage with durable, resilient materials and assemblies that minimize maintenance needs.*
- *Develop a funding strategy to support regular, routine maintenance of the trail and its support facilities as well as major repairs from high impact events such as floods and fires.*

The community survey on Project Actions received 114 responses, and was closed on November 18, 2021. Following the same model used to synthesize the input on the Vision Statement and Project Goals, an ad hoc subcommittee of Community Working Group members convened to analyze the survey responses and use the input to revise and improve the list of project actions prior to submitting them to the full Community Working Group for discussion and adoption.

The subcommittee, which consisted of Ralph Mendershausen, Michael Martin, and Art Baggett, met four times from November 2021–February 2022, following the same methodology for synthesizing community input, and using survey results as the basis for revising the draft project actions. Those recommended revisions then went from the subcommittee to the wider Community Working Group to discuss, approve, and vote to approve, which they did at the February 9, 2022 meeting. Minor wordsmithing of Actions 4.2, 5.1, 6.3, and 8.1 took place during the development of Chapter 3: Action Plan.

Results are summarized below, and detailed in the next chapter.

1. **Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent and surrounding communities.**

The draft actions associated with this goal were the most difficult to revise based on the results of the community survey. On average, the draft actions were neither extremely popular or unpopular with the entire survey respondent pool. However, individual responses varied widely, with many respondents ranking these draft actions, especially “Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta and follows existing public rights of way to the greatest extent possible” as the single most important action in the entire survey, while many others indicated that they would be extremely frustrated were the trail not to pass through El Portal and Foresta.

**114**  
SURVEY RESPONSES

**29**  
INITIAL DRAFT ACTIONS

**1**  
DRAFT ACTION  
ELIMINATED

**4**  
DRAFT ACTIONS  
SIGNIFICANTLY  
REVISED

**1**  
NEW ACTION  
DEVELOPED

**29**  
ADOPTED PROJECT  
ACTIONS

Those in the first camp were primarily residents of El Portal and Foresta, who expressed concerns about the trail's impact on safety and community character. These perspectives were frequently conveyed during public meetings by the El Portal residents on the CWG, who, in addition to sharing their own concerns, passed on shared concerns of their friends and neighbors. The CWG also received formal letters from community groups in El Portal and Foresta expressing similar opinions about the anticipated impact of increased trail usage on their neighborhoods.

The CWG conducted research and heard public comment from stakeholders who believe that these potential impacts can be mitigated by trail programming and design strategies related to signage, site planning, and other counter-measures. While this may prove to be true in the future, the planning process revealed—unequivocally—that the prevailing view of the El Portal and Foresta communities is that it would be extremely detrimental to their neighborhoods if the Merced River Trail were to pass through them.

The CWG decided to prioritize this clear direction from those most directly impacted by the trail's route. Therefore, the draft actions for this goal did not change based on the community's input.

## **2. Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite.**

The draft actions associated with this goal were generally seen as desirable, appropriate, and effective. The survey suggested minor revisions to help clarify the intent of some of the actions.

## **3. Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon.**

The draft actions were generally popular, with little to no recommended revisions. However, it was suggested that the draft project action “Establish an MRT support group of informed local people that will visit the trail with some regularity to see and note its quality and use” be revised to provide more clarity and detail about this group's primary roles and responsibilities.

## **4. Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation**

These draft actions scored highly among survey respondents, and only minor revisions were recommended.

## **5. Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized, recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses.**

The survey suggested two substantive revisions to the draft actions associated with this goal. First, the draft project action “Query and review agency regulations regarding management of public access on their portions of the trail to be summarized and made available to MRT users, community, and interested parties” was re-written to be clearer and more comprehensible. Second, the draft project action “Seek written input from equestrians on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage” was revised to better reflect the variety of non-motorized uses that may become more popular and widespread along the Merced River Trail in the future.

## **6. Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County.**

The survey indicated general support for the draft actions associated with this goal. However, the draft project action “Investigate, research and advance efforts to implement the historic Sherlock Creek trail from Ethel May Mine to West Whitlock Mining Area” did not score highly and was eliminated from the final action list.

## **7. Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon.**

The survey suggested substantive revisions to both of this goal's draft actions. First, the draft action “Connect people to the area's unique conservation values with signage or kiosks that minimize impact to natural resources and scenic qualities” was revised to include additional objectives and design parameters for future trail furnishings. Second, the draft project action “Maximize local volunteers in MRT projects” was revised to be more detailed about the roles that local volunteers might play in specific types of trail project.

Additionally, a new project action was created to respond to stakeholders' input regarding expanded educational and stewardship activities and programs focused on the river, canyon, and trail.

## **8. Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities.**

These draft actions rated among the highest priorities of any in the survey. The survey indicated that no revisions were needed to these actions.



## PROJECT ACTIONS: GOALS 1-4

- GOAL 1** Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent surrounding communities
- ACTION 1.1** Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta
- ACTION 1.2** Explore adding and improving YARTS bus stops to maximize the use of public transit options connecting Mariposa and Yosemite National Park to the proposed trail

- GOAL 4** Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation
- ACTION 4.1** Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies
- ACTION 4.2** Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife
- ACTION 4.3** Ensure that the trail is designed and maintained by agency-appropriate standard trail plans and specifications to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with agency requirements for natural surfacing
- ACTION 4.4** Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses
- ACTION 4.5** Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads
- ACTION 4.6** Support agency partners in the study, evaluation, and future mitigation needs for issues of law enforcement, fire issues, human waste and trash, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services, commensurate with future use

- GOAL 2** Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite
- ACTION 2.1** Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment
- ACTION 2.2** Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek
- ACTION 2.3** Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail
- ACTION 2.4** Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan
- GOAL 3** Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon
- ACTION 3.1** Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon
- ACTION 3.2** Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trailheads
- ACTION 3.3** Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges
- ACTION 3.4** Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives
- ACTION 3.5** Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor

## PROJECT ACTIONS: GOALS 5-8

- GOAL 5** Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses
- ACTION 5.1** Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail
- ACTION 5.2** Seek written input from new user groups on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage
- ACTION 5.3** Develop and publish a use plan for major MRT river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments.

- GOAL 7** Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon
- ACTION 7.1** Install aesthetically appropriate public information elements that educate trail users about the river canyon's natural and cultural resources, and promote safe, responsible, and low-impact use of the trail
- ACTION 7.2** Maximize local volunteers in Merced River Trail projects, including trail maintenance, monitoring, and citizen science activities that contribute to other objectives in the Vision Plan
- ACTION 7.3** Support a program of community education and engagement activities, including guided field trips, presentations, and other events that build connections to the river and trail

- GOAL 6** Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County
- ACTION 6.1** Expand and advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Creek Preserve Trail System
- ACTION 6.2** Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal land-owner agencies for design and feasibility of a "proposed Trail" in Merced Irrigation District's FERC Recreation Plan connecting the Merced River Trail from Bagby to McSwain Dam
- ACTION 6.3** Continue to collaborate with BLM, USFS, and NPS to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions

- GOAL 8** Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities
- ACTION 8.1** Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the resources necessary for the trail's long-term success
- ACTION 8.2** Locate, design, and construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage to minimize maintenance needs
- ACTION 8.3** Develop a funding strategy to support construction, regular maintenance, and major repairs of the trail and its support facilities

### PROJECT ACTIONS REVISIONS

The online survey and conversations and input provided during previous phases in the vision planning process resulted in the Community Working Group revising the initial list of draft project actions into 29 goal-specific actions for realizing the project's overall vision.



A scenic landscape of a river valley. In the foreground, a dirt trail winds through a field of tall green grass and yellow wildflowers. To the left, a river flows through a narrow channel. The background features steep, green hills under a blue sky with wispy clouds.

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**The Merced River Trail  
will manifest our community's  
appreciation of our county's  
ecological, scenic, and cultural  
resources along the Wild and Scenic  
Merced River.**

**It will address the growing needs  
for education, access to recreation,  
and regional economic development  
with the imperative for conserving  
the canyon's many remarkable  
resources.**

**The trail will serve as a central  
connective component of an  
existing and future network  
of trails.**

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ADOPTED PROJECT VISION STATEMENT

EXISTING RIVER TRAIL BELOW RAILROAD FLAT // BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT JURISDICTION



# 3. ACTION PLAN

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***The visioning process described in the previous chapter outlined the process that project participants undertook to make increasingly specific statements and decisions about the Merced River Trail's role in advancing the community's aspirations for the river canyon, watershed, and county.***

Beginning with a statement of the community's vision for the trail's intended recreational and ecological benefits, the process then identified eight overarching goals that add specificity to that vision. Finally, the vision planning effort revealed 29 discrete actions that could be taken to achieve the project's goals and realize the community's vision.

This chapter, the Action Plan, details each one of those 29 recommended actions with the intention of equipping trail advocates to move ahead with implementing them. For each action, the Action Plan provides an overview that describes the recommendation and its relationship to the overall vision,

identifies immediate next steps and roles for advancing implementation efforts, and outlines a general timeline for taking those next steps in the short-term.

For nearly all actions, the Action Plan provides additional materials that can further support local and federal partners in implementing the recommendation, including precedent projects, guidance, or related and leverageable County initiatives. Where appropriate, the Action Plan also references the Appendices, which collects further materials that can be useful for carrying out the Action Plan and achieving the community's vision for the Merced River Trail.



# GOAL 1

*Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent surrounding communities*

## ACTION 1.1

*Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta*

## ACTION 1.2

*Explore adding and improving YARTS bus stops to maximize the use of public transit options connecting Mariposa and Yosemite National Park to the proposed trail*

# GOAL 2

*Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite*

## ACTION 2.1

*Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment*

## ACTION 2.2

*Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek*

## ACTION 2.3

*Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail.*

## ACTION 2.4

*Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan*

# GOAL 3

*Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.1

*Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.2

*Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trail heads*

## ACTION 3.3

*Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges*

## ACTION 3.4

*Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives*

## ACTION 3.5

*Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor*

# GOAL 4

*Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation*

## ACTION 4.1

*Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies*

## ACTION 4.2

*Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife*

## ACTION 4.3

*Ensure that the trail is designed and maintained by agency-appropriate standard trail plans and specifications to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with agency requirements for natural surfacing*

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*Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses*

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*Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads*

## ACTION 4.6

*Support agency partners in the study, evaluation, and future mitigation needs for issues of law enforcement, fire issues, human waste and trash, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services, commensurate with future use*



### SEASONALITY

Seasonal variations in the river's flow regime reveal different landscapes for trail users throughout the year





## GOAL 5

*Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses*

### ACTION 5.1

*Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail*

### ACTION 5.2

*Seek written input from new user groups on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage*

### ACTION 5.3

*Develop and publish a use plan for major Merced River Trail river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments*

#### CELEBRATED COMMUNITY RESOURCE

The existing segment of the Merced River Trail within Bureau of Land Management jurisdiction is well loved by both residents and visitors. Conserving the qualities that make this trail and landscape special are essential outcomes of each of the Action Plan's recommendations.



## GOAL 6

*Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County*

### ACTION 6.1

*Expand and advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Creek Preserve Trail System*

### ACTION 6.2

*Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal land-owner agencies for design and feasibility of a “proposed Trail” in Merced Irrigation District’s FERC Recreation Plan connecting the Merced River Trail from Bagby to McSwain Dam*

### ACTION 6.3

*Continue to collaborate with BLM, USFS, and NPS to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions*

## GOAL 7

*Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community’s connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon*

### ACTION 7.1

*Install aesthetically appropriate public information elements that educate trail users about the river canyon’s natural and cultural resources, and promote safe, responsible, and low-impact use of the trail*

### ACTION 7.2

*Maximize local volunteers in Merced River Trail projects, including trail maintenance, monitoring, and citizen science activities that contribute to other objectives in the Vision Plan*

### ACTION 7.3

*Support a program of community education and engagement activities, including guided field trips, presentations, and other events that build connections to the river and trail*

## GOAL 8

*Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities*

### ACTION 8.1

*Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the resources necessary for the trail’s long-term success*

### ACTION 8.2

*Locate, design, and construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage to minimize maintenance needs*

### ACTION 8.3

*Develop a funding strategy to support construction, regular maintenance, and major repairs of the trail and its support facilities*

## A NOTE ABOUT THE ACTION PLAN

The following pages provide further specificity about each of the Vision Plan’s recommendations.

Each recommendation includes an **Overview**, which details the recommendation’s intent and meaning, suggested **Next Steps** for advancing the recommended action, and a conceptual **Timeline** for implementing those next steps. Most recommendations also include images to supporting resources, such as precedent projects, applicable technical assistance, and other materials that can aid in understanding and implementing the recommendation.

Finally, where appropriate, the narrative for each recommendation refers to additional supporting materials located in the **Vision Plan Appendices**. These supplementary materials provide further guidance and direction for achieving the Action Plan’s recommendations.



# GOAL 1

*Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent surrounding communities*

## ACTION 1.1

*Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta*

## ACTION 1.2

*Explore adding and improving YARTS bus stops to maximize the use of public transit options connecting Mariposa and Yosemite National Park to the proposed trail*

## ACTION 1.1 //

### ***Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta.***

#### **OVERVIEW**

At the outset of the vision planning process, it was assumed that the Merced River Trail would follow the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade from Bagby to El Portal, then follow Old Foresta Road from El Portal through Foresta to Big Oak Flat Road in Yosemite. However, the visioning process revealed that this route was not popular with many residents of the El Portal and Foresta communities, who expressed concerns about potential impacts of the trail on their neighborhoods. Common concerns included impacts from traffic and unsafe driving, and the potential for these communities to serve as de facto trailheads for the Merced River Trail. While many El Portal and Foresta residents support the trail concept, there is near-universal agreement in these communities that the Merced River Trail should be routed and implemented in ways that avoid adverse impacts to these neighborhoods.

However, it is also important to note that the vision process also revealed a strong and unified perspective that, in order for the Merced River Trail to be successful, it has to follow the Merced River and the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade for the greatest extent possible. Not only does this enable the trail to achieve the project's historic and environmental interpretation benefits, but this is also the vision for the trail as established in Bureau of Land Management and US Forest Service Wild and Scenic river plans. The vision planning process revealed several potential routes to consider, all of which have strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, the Community Working Group combined aspects of several of those potential routes to identify a preferred route that, along with a handful of other options, will be the subject of a more rigorous impact assessment at a later date.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

Identifying the preferred route(s) for the Merced River Trail, so that it balances all of the priorities and needs expressed in the Vision Plan—connecting with Yosemite, contributing to environmental and cultural resource conservation and education, and not jeopardizing adjacent neighborhoods—is of the highest priority. While the Vision Plan establishes the parameters of a successful trail project and identifies a recommended route, a dedicated, well-resourced study is needed to add detail and specificity to the Vision Plan's route investigation.

Such a study would rely on both extensive community engagement (with the public and federal land management leadership) and quantitative landscape suitability analysis to compare and contrast alternatives, evaluating multiple options to identify the optimal route for satisfying all of the community's aspirations for the Merced River Trail. This study could take place within the context of a federal NEPA process, or presage one. Regardless, NEPA will need to take place in order to formally select a route(s) to implement in federal jurisdiction.

#### **TIMELINE**

Effectively conducting this study will require capacity that exceeds that of current county staffing levels. Identifying and securing funds to hire a consultant could commence immediately, or could be funded by the Board so that route planning work can begin right away.





Foresta (CA)



El Portal (CA)

#### ANTICIPATED COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Throughout the visioning process, residents of the El Portal and Foresta communities frequently and unequivocally expressed their concerns over various impacts of a trail through their neighborhoods.

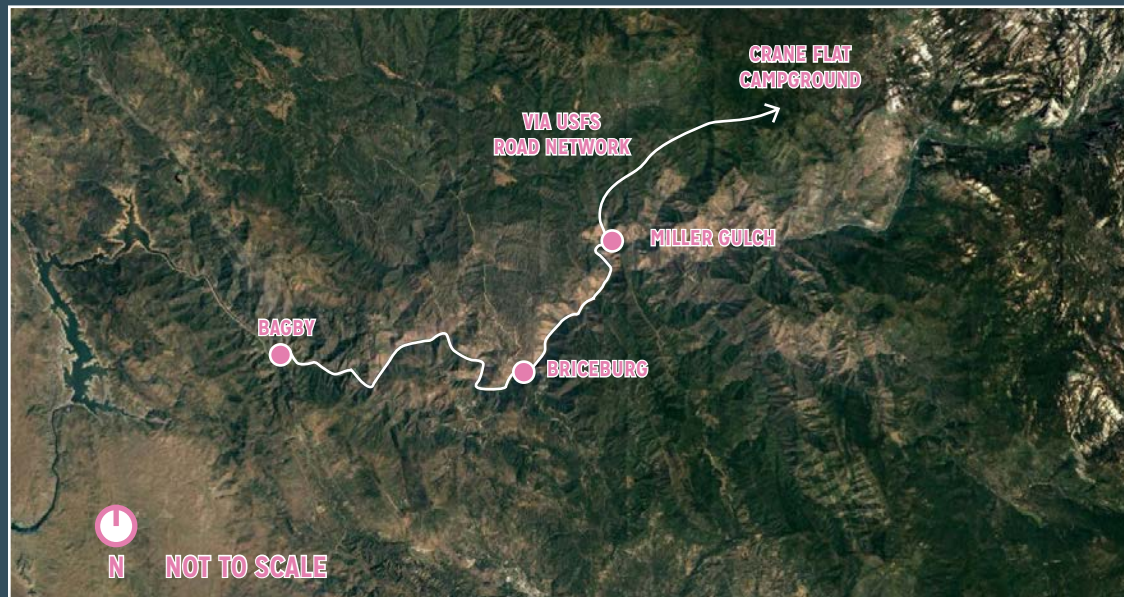
Among resident's chief concerns were inadequate resources to accommodate increased parking and waste from trail users, impacts of additional vehicular traffic on small streets, and safety concerns associated with illegal camping. While many of these respondents are in favor of a trail through the Merced River canyon, they are, at this time, nearly universally opposed to a trail through that would pass through El Portal and Foresta.



# ROUTES DISCUSSED // LOWER CANYON



1	VIA BURMA GRADE
OVERVIEW	THIS ROUTE WOULD CLIMB OUT OF THE RIVER CANYON AT BRICEBURG VIA THE BURMA GRADE, AN EXISTING JEEP ROAD THAT PROVIDES ACCESS TO OTHER RUGGED ROADS THROUGH BLM AND USFS LAND TO YOSEMITE.
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FUNNELS TRAIL TRAFFIC ONTO AREAS THAT HAVE BEEN PREVIOUSLY IMPACTED</li> </ul>
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>HIGHER ROUTE IS MORE EXPOSED AND HAS LESS AVAILABLE WATER RESOURCES</li> <li>LARGELY BYPASSES RAIL GRADE, SCENIC BEAUTY AND CULTURAL INTEREST OF THE RIVER CANYON</li> </ul>



2	VIA MILLER GULCH
OVERVIEW	THIS ROUTE WOULD CLIMB OUT OF THE RIVER CANYON AT MILLER GULCH (EMORY), AND ACCESS EXISTING USFS ROADS INTO YOSEMITE AT THE CRANE FLAT CAMPGROUND
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PROVIDES SIGNIFICANT ACCESS TO RIVER, WITHOUT INTERFERING WITH COMMUNITIES OF EL PORTAL AND FORESTA</li> <li>TERMINUS IN YOSEMITE PROVIDES CONTROLLED TRAILHEAD SERVICES AND IS ADJACENT TO TRANSIT</li> </ul>
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TOPOGRAPHICALLY CHALLENGING ROUTE APPEARS TO BE FEASIBLE FOR HIKERS, BUT PERHAPS NOT OTHER USERS</li> </ul>

## ROUTE OPPORTUNITIES // LOWER CANYON

The visioning process revealed two potential route alternatives between Briceburg and the Ferguson rock slide that could satisfy the objective of connecting Bagby to Yosemite.



# ROUTES DISCUSSED // UPPER CANYON



3	VIA OLD EL PORTAL
OVERVIEW	THIS ROUTE WOULD ADHERE TO THE ENTIRE HISTORIC YOSEMITE VALLEY RAILROAD RIGHT OF WAY INTO EL PORTAL, AND ACCESS YOSEMITE WEST OF PARKLINE SLAB
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MAXIMIZES ACCESS TO HISTORIC YVRR RAIL GRADE</li> <li>• LIKELY THE SHORTEST AND MOST DIRECT ROUTE FROM BAGBY TO YOSEMITE</li> </ul>
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EXTREMELY UNPOPULAR WITH THE NEIGHBORHOODS THAT WOULD BE MOST AFFECTED BY THIS ROUTE.</li> <li>• OPPOSITION FROM THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES MAKES THIS ROUTE A NON-STARTER AT THIS POINT IN TIME.</li> </ul>

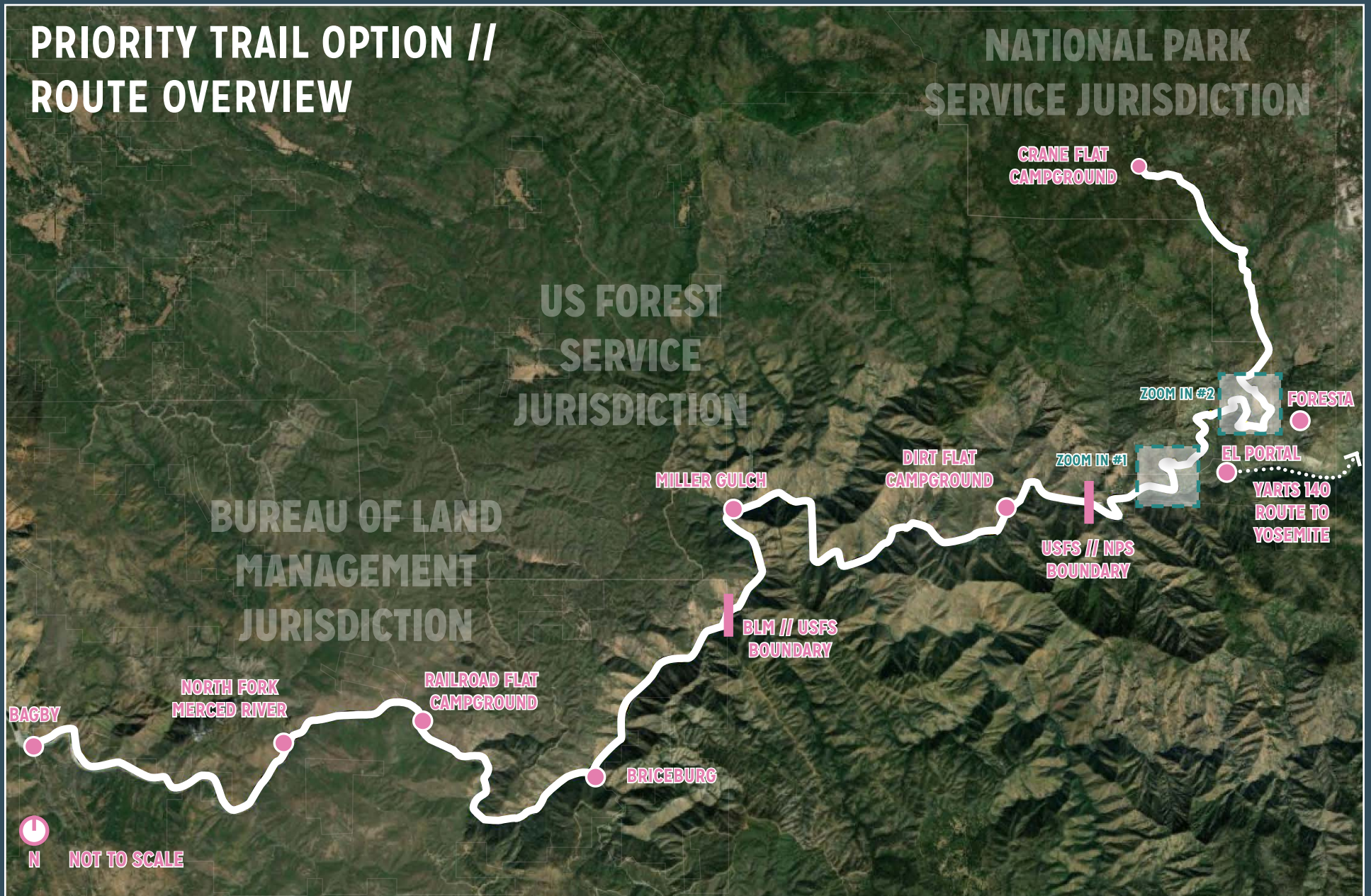


4	VIA HISTORIC BOLTON ROUTE
OVERVIEW	THIS ROUTE WOULD FOLLOW THE HISTORIC TRAIL DESIGNED AND BUILT BY A.W. BOLTON, WHICH FOLLOWED THE NORTH SIDE OF THE RIVER TO THE CASCADES IN YOSEMITE VALLEY.
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PROVIDES DIRECT ACCESS TO YOSEMITE VALLEY</li> <li>• ADHERES TO A HISTORIC AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT ROUTE</li> </ul>
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MUST EITHER PASS THROUGH EL PORTAL OR REQUIRE TRAIL USERS TO TRAVEL ON HWY. 140</li> <li>• REQUIRES SIGNIFICANT COLLABORATION WITH NPS AND AN EXTENSIVE, POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW.</li> </ul>

## ROUTE OPTIONS // UPPER CANYON

Above the Ferguson rock slide, participants identified two routes—neither of which is entirely acceptable with local communities—that could provide trail access into the park.

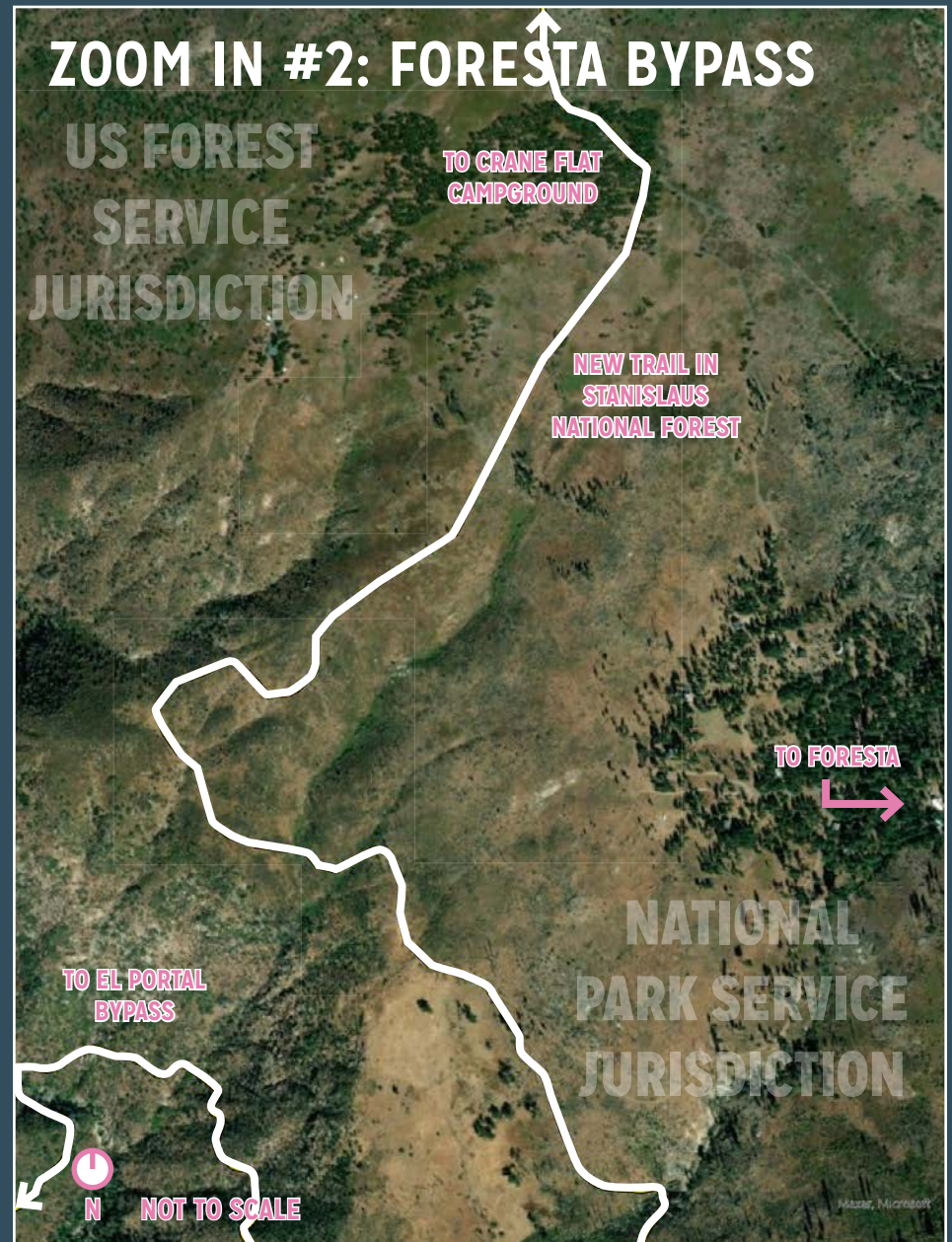
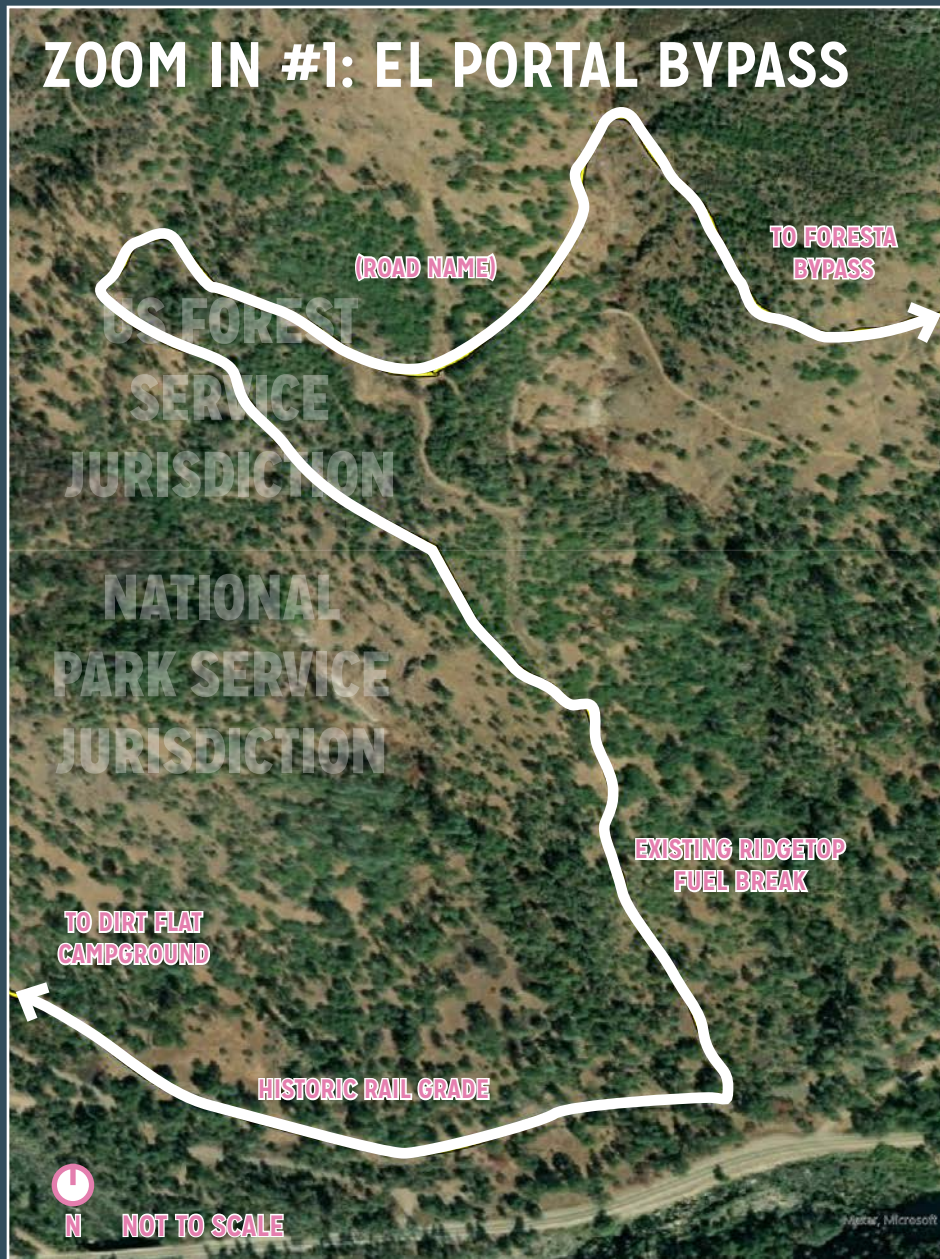




## MULTIPLE INTERESTS, OPTIMAL ROUTE

The visioning process revealed community preferences for a trail route that connects to Yosemite National Park, maximizes the distance spent along the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade, and minimizes impacts to the communities of El Portal and Foresta. The priority trail option, which will need to be evaluated and compared to other alternatives through agency-appropriate processes, seeks to balance these perspectives on the trail and provide an optimal route that satisfies multiple interests.





#### COMMUNITY BYPASSES WITH LOCAL SUPPORT

During the visioning process, the Community Working Group worked with members of the El Portal and Foresta communities to devise the above route modifications, which are intended to bypass those communities while still providing direct, continuous trail access between the rail grade along the river and Yosemite National Park above the river canyon. These bypasses have been initially reviewed by members of the El Portal and Foresta communities and are endorsed by the Community Working Group's residents of these areas.



# GOAL 1

*Ensure that the Merced River Trail does not jeopardize or negatively impact the public safety, social well-being, or historic character of adjacent surrounding communities*

## ACTION 1.1

*Route the trail so that it bypasses the communities of El Portal and Foresta*

## ACTION 1.2

*Explore adding and improving YARTS bus stops to maximize the use of public transit options connecting Mariposa and Yosemite National Park to the proposed trail*

## ACTION 1.2 //

***Explore adding and improving YARTS bus stops to maximize the use of public transit options connecting Mariposa and Yosemite National Park to the proposed trail.***

### OVERVIEW

Yosemite Area Regional Transportation Service (YARTS) currently provides transit connections to key destinations along the Highway 140 corridor, with multiple existing stops that could be beneficial to serving trail users. These include park and ride facilities in Mariposa and Midpines, and could potentially include a future transportation center in the Town of Mariposa, which has been explored by several recent community planning initiatives.

Expanded and enhanced service could reduce the need for trail users to drive to the trail, reducing the potential impact of increased visitation on the limited trailhead services currently in the canyon. It could also support Action 1.1 by allowing trail users to use non-motorized recreational modes to travel upstream along the river to a YARTS stop outside of El Portal, and take the bus into Yosemite—either to destinations in Yosemite Valley, or seasonally to existing stops along Old Big Oak Flat Road and the Highway 120 corridor. Other potential modifications to YARTS service that could serve the Merced River Trail include a new stop at or near the current Briceburg trailhead and at the existing Bagby developed recreational area on the south side of the river.

Regardless of whether new service is added, one important question to resolve is whether the current fleet of YARTS buses is adequate for additional bicycles on the Merced River Trail. While the current coach buses have storage for items under the bus, it isn't clear how many bicycles this area can accommodate, whether there are limitations to the type and size of under-bus bikes, and if bicycle users are comfortable storing their bikes in this fashion. Answering these questions will be important to determining next steps—if the current fleet is inadequate, bicycle advocates could seek to add tray-style bike racks often seen on urban buses onto the current fleet. Or, if YARTS is pursuing fleet upgrades, perhaps bike storage could be addressed in this process.

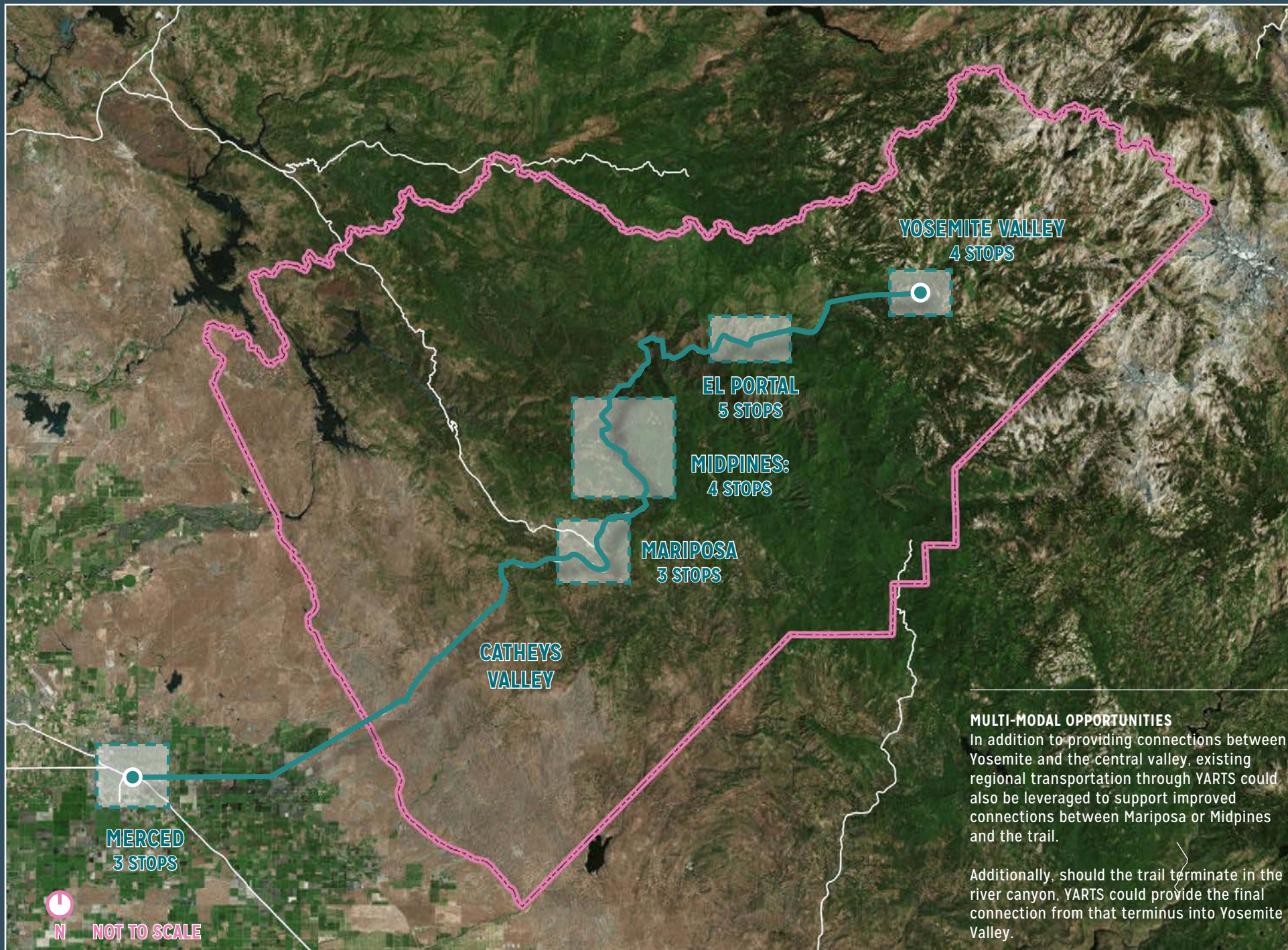
### NEXT STEPS

Unlike most recommendations in this chapter, this is one where the primary project partners—led by Mariposa County, and supported by relevant federal agencies—will likely have to rely on another agency to take the lead. In this case, the project partnership should engage with and ultimately support YARTS in identifying any updates or modifications that would be necessary to support trail use, and pursuing the resources needed to make them. With YARTS recently completing a five-year short-range transit plan that includes reduced service, it seems likely that additional resources for trail-supportive transit through the agency will be needed.

### TIMELINE

The County and NPS both have strong working relationships with YARTS, and initial conversations could commence immediately after Board adoption of the Vision Plan.







# GOAL 2

*Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite*

## ACTION 2.1

*Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment*

## ACTION 2.2

*Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek*

## ACTION 2.3

*Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail.*

## ACTION 2.4

*Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan*

## ACTION 2.1 //

### ***Conduct a comprehensive investigation into public right of way access issues affecting the trail alignment.***

#### **OVERVIEW**

The Merced River canyon is almost exclusively public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), and Merced Irrigation District (MID). There are also known private lands within the river canyon (including Miller Gulch, discussed in Action 2.3). And there are a very small (not yet fully known) number of privately owned parcels that the Merced River Trail may traverse which could require right-of-way access, such as a public easement or fee title acquisition, in order to complete the trail.

In order to realize the community's vision for the Merced River Trail, these right of way access questions need to be addressed and, if necessary, resolved. Depending on the condition of the site and the position of its owners, this could involve purchasing easements for recreational access, fee title property acquisitions, or various forms of donated right of way access, depending on the situation, land owner, and need.

An initial right of way study would involve a close inspection of the proposed trail route(s) in relation to an assessor parcels map. Based on the outcome of this initial study, it may be necessary to perform targeted surveys in areas where potential trail is close to property boundaries. Importantly, the Record of Decision for the USFS 1991 Merced Wild and Scenic River Management Plan, which endorses the selection of River Management Alternative C, states that under this selected alternative, "scenic easements may be required."

#### **NEXT STEPS**

Ideally, this task could be completed by the federal agencies whose jurisdiction surrounds properties with potential right of way access questions. Agencies will need geospatial data for the trail right of way, which the County can provide. County staff can also conduct an initial right of way study to include the Planning and Public Works departments, Assessor and Recorder's Office, and County Counsel. A full study will likely require the support of a title company and/or real estate lawyer to interpret existing recorded easements. This action probably requires external funding, but perhaps agency budgets could be used.

Ultimately, the completed study will result in at least some right of way acquisition, which will likely require external funding to conduct. Acquisition efforts, including pursuing funding, could be managed by a regional land trust, such as the Sierra Foothills Conservancy, or the potential trail conservancy identified in Action 8.1.

#### **TIMELINE**

The initial right of way study could kick-off immediately after Board adoption of the Vision Plan, and take from 3-6 months. The results of that initial study will determine the timeline for the more technical comprehensive study.





*Former hotel building // Miller Gulch (Emory)*

#### **PRIVATE RIGHT OF WAY, PUBLIC BENEFIT**

Access through the privately owned Miller Gulch (Emory) property is critical for Merced River Trail project to realize its recreational and ecological benefits. It is possible that there are additional right of way issues along the historic rail grade, which would need to be resolved for the trail to be successful.



# GOAL 2

*Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite*

## ACTION 2.1

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## ACTION 2.2

*Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek*

## ACTION 2.3

*Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail.*

## ACTION 2.4

*Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan*

## ACTION 2.2 //

***Collaborate with the Bureau of Land Management and Merced Irrigation District to install a trail crossing over the North Fork of the Merced River and the mainstem of the river at Sherlock Creek.***

### OVERVIEW

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license for Merced Irrigation District's (MID) Merced River Hydroelectric Project includes a plan to develop an all-season hiking and biking trail between Bagby Recreation Area and Briceburg. In order to construct this section of the Merced River Trail, MID, BLM, other organizations with trail interests, and the public need to collaborate, develop a plan, secure funding, build and maintain a MID-sponsored bridge for cyclists and hikers that crosses the Merced River near the Sherlock Creek area, connecting the trail from the north side to the south side of the Merced River and build a south side trail to Bagby. License conditions are further summarized in Appendix I.

The plan includes two conditions: 1) within 3 years of the final license, BLM has to verify the existence of legal public access through ownership or easements along the Merced River between Bagby and the North Fork, and 2) BLM has to construct a bridge across the North Fork of the Merced River to allow safe public crossing during spring snow melt off and storm events. Project partners need regular updates on the status of this action, such as public meetings, notifications, and press releases, and to coordinate on project planning and implementation.

### NEXT STEPS

Project partners should pursue a range of short- and long-term next steps, including monitoring the agreement's litigation status, contacting principals and interested parties for status reports on their project action activities, conducting public outreach when the FERC license is adopted, and seeking funding for pre-project planning and grant applications. These tasks can be delegated among local, federal, and non-profit partners as the partnership sees appropriate. In this case, the role for the County is comparatively small in implementing this action, whereas the role for local non-profits, including existing ones like the Merced River Conservation Committee and Upper Merced River Watershed Council, and a potential conservancy organization (identified in Action 8.1.) is high.

### TIMELINE

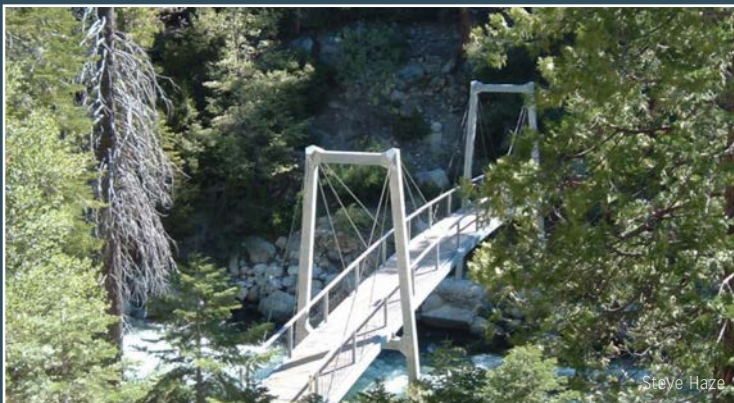
Implementing this recommendation is contingent upon FERC issuance of the License for the Merced River Hydroelectric Project, which is currently awaiting final FERC approval pending consideration of State Water Quality Certification conditions of the California State Water Control Board. There are several court cases pending related to water quality certification issues for this project. FERC is delaying the issuance of a final license until these court actions are completed. Once the license is issued, Merced ID and BLM have 3 years to implement and construct the project. Both trail crossings (North Fork and Merced River near Sherlock Creek) are required to complete the project under the FERC license conditions.





San Joaquin River Gorge

David Prasad



North Fork San Joaquin River, Ansel Adams Wilderness

Steve Haze



Big Sandy Creek

Steve Haze

#### REGIONAL PRECEDENT

The San Joaquin River Trail will eventually extend from the Friant dam in Fresno County to Devil's Postpile National Monument in the Sierra Nevada. The current trail crosses several major creeks and drainages via bridges that are robust enough to withstand the elements and support traffic from non-motorized recreational users, without severely impacting the visual quality of the landscape.



# GOAL 2

*Facilitate the elimination of barriers to the creation of a continuous, year-round trail from Bagby to Yosemite*

## ACTION 2.1

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## ACTION 2.3

*Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail.*

## ACTION 2.4

*Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan*

## ACTION 2.3 //

***Seek opportunities to leverage the Merced River Trail for restoring, enhancing, and, where necessary, acquiring public access to and through historic industrial sites that are adjacent to the river and trail.***

### OVERVIEW

The community's stated vision for the Merced River Trail describes it as more than a resource for appropriate and agency-endorsed recreation, but also an opportunity for improved ecological outcomes in the Merced River canyon and watershed. Much of this potential lies in the trail's ability to foster connections to the landscape and promote a sense of environmental stewardship among trail users. However, participants in the Vision Planning process also identified the trail's relationship to river-adjacent industrial sites, including former mining sites, as an innovative opportunity to both promote recreational access through the river canyon and address the environmental impacts of its rail, mining, and timbering history.

One such opportunity exists at the Miller Gulch site, a former cement quarry and plant on private land surrounded on three sides by Stanislaus National Forest. The site includes approximately 2000 linear feet of historic rail grade which is of the highest value for providing continuous non-motorized recreational access through the river canyon. Beyond providing a critical connection along the river, the site presents other opportunities that align with the community's vision for the trail, including potential for historic preservation/interpretation and ecological restoration of the gulch. This could address potential impacts of past industrial uses and the Ferguson Fire (2018), which caused significant damage to the site's historic buildings and upland areas. On this site, the trail partnership could develop a strategy for acquiring public access while enabling future improvements of the site's environmental conditions, resulting in both a better trail experience and a healthier watershed.

It is important to note that the Miller Gulch site is just one of many historic industrial sites in the Merced River canyon, many of which could have their own issues related to public access, ecological restoration, or some combination of both. A comprehensive right-of-way study (Action 2.1) could be paired with an assessment of sites where historic environmental impacts are likely to have occurred to identify additional opportunities for aligning right of way acquisition with ecological enhancements.

### NEXT STEPS

The County should continue pursuing resources to understand and, where needed, resolve right-of-way questions and opportunities for environmental enhancement on historic industrial sites adjacent to the Merced River Trail. This requires collaboration with federal and state partners, including land managers and environmental health agencies, to secure appropriate public access, and implement effective ecological enhancements on these sites.

### TIMELINE

This is both an innovative strategy and a priority action for achieving the community's vision for the trail. It should be among the first tasks implemented upon adoption of the Vision Plan.





#### RESTORATION, RECLAMATION, AND MINIMAL RECREATION IMPROVEMENTS

Through the EPA's Land Revitalization Technical Assistance program, Mariposa County facilitated several workshops with community members and agency partners to frame out an approach for improving the Miller Gulch site in ways that align with the Merced River Trail Vision Plan. This includes restoring native species on site, addressing potential contamination from past industrial uses, and implementing minor recreation improvements to provide non-motorized access to and through the site.



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## ACTION 2.4 //

***Work with the US Forest Service to formally designate the historic railroad grade within Stanislaus National Forest jurisdiction as a trail with design parameters that align with the natural character recommended in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan.***

### OVERVIEW

Depending on final route(s) recommendations, the Merced River Trail will either exclusively or primarily follow the historic Yosemite Valley Railroad grade on the northern banks of the river through the canyon. In Bureau of Land Management (BLM) jurisdiction, this area is a designated trail, with agency-approved parameters for trail design, use, and management. However, though technically accessible by the public, the historic rail grade in US Forest Service jurisdiction is not formally designated as a trail. This means that no “trail work”—brushing, clearing, or other minor modifications to support non-motorized recreational access—are authorized at this time.

USFS will have to designate the trail in order for these activities, as well as long-term maintenance and management tasks, to occur. Designation involves a significant NEPA compliance effort, including trail specifications and studies to evaluate the potential impacts of the intended trail on cultural and ecological resources. While this work could be the responsibility of USFS staff, the reality is that designating the trail will happen more quickly if the County and its partners lead the endeavor, in partnership with Stanislaus National Forest and other agency staff as appropriate. However, it's worth noting that the Record of Decision for the agency's 1991 Merced Wild and Scenic River Management Plan, which endorses the selection of River Management Alternative C, states that under this selected alternative, “(t)he potential multi-agency Merced River Trail would be allowed to be built,” indicating that the agency should support this action once it is determined through NEPA and NHPA consultation processes that the project will cause no significant impacts or adverse effects

### NEXT STEPS

The County has a preliminary scope of work for the trail designation activities, including the NEPA compliance and USFS coordination necessary for comprehensive designation (Appendix C). Initially, the Mariposa County Planning Department could lead the designation process, in partnership with Stanislaus National Forest and Sierra National Forest. Importantly, the scale and technical complexity of the NEPA work will require the services of an environmental planning consultant. This action will need funding, so adequate fundraising organizations (especially the organization referred to in Action 8.1) will also play a role.

### TIMELINE

With sufficient funding, the consultant-assisted trail designation scope could begin within months of adoption of the Vision Plan. Once initiated, it could be completed in 30-36 months.



## Trail Class Matrix (FSH 2353, Section 14.2, Exhibit 01)

Trail Classes are general categories reflecting trail development scale, arranged along a continuum. The Trail Class identified for a National Forest System (NFS) trail prescribes its development scale, representing its intended design and management standards.<sup>1</sup> Local deviations from any Trail Class descriptor may be established based on trail-specific conditions, topography, or other factors, provided that the deviations do not undermine the general intent of the applicable Trail Class.

Identify the appropriate Trail Class for each National Forest System trail or trail segment based on the management intent in the applicable land management plan, travel management direction, trail-specific decisions, and other related direction. Apply the Trail Class that most closely matches the management intent for the trail or trail segment, which may or may not reflect the current condition of the trail.

Trail Attributes	Trail Class 1 Minimally Developed	Trail Class 2 Moderately Developed	Trail Class 3 Developed	Trail Class 4 Highly Developed	Trail Class 5 Fully Developed
<b>Tread &amp; Traffic Flow</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tread intermittent and often indistinct</li> <li>May require route finding</li> <li>Single lane with no allowances constructed for passing</li> <li>Predominantly native materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tread continuous and discernible, but narrow and rough</li> <li>Single lane with minor allowances constructed for passing</li> <li>Typically native materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tread continuous and obvious</li> <li>Single lane, with allowances constructed for passing where required by traffic volumes in areas with no reasonable passing opportunities available</li> <li>Native or imported materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tread wide and relatively smooth with few irregularities</li> <li>Single lane, with allowances constructed for passing where required by traffic volumes in areas with no reasonable passing opportunities available</li> <li>Double lane where traffic volumes are high and passing is frequent</li> <li>Native or imported materials</li> <li>May be hardened</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tread wide, firm, stable, and generally uniform</li> <li>Single lane, with frequent turnouts where traffic volumes are low to moderate</li> <li>Double lane where traffic volumes are moderate to high</li> <li>Commonly hardened with asphalt or other imported material</li> </ul>
<b>Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obstacles common, naturally occurring, often substantial and intended to provide increased challenge</li> <li>Narrow passages; brush, steep grades, rocks and logs present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obstacles may be common, substantial, and intended to provide increased challenge</li> <li>Blockages cleared to define route and protect resources</li> <li>Vegetation may encroach into trailway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obstacles may be common, but not substantial or intended to provide challenge</li> <li>Vegetation cleared outside of trailway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obstacles infrequent and insubstantial</li> <li>Vegetation cleared outside of trailway</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Obstacles not present</li> <li>Grades typically &lt; 8%</li> </ul>
<b>Constructed Features &amp; Trail Elements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structures minimal to non-existent</li> <li>Drainage typically accomplished without structures</li> <li>Natural fords</li> <li>Typically no bridges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structures of limited size, scale, and quantity; typically constructed of native materials</li> <li>Structures adequate to protect trail infrastructure and resources</li> <li>Natural fords</li> <li>Bridges as needed for resource protection and appropriate access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structures may be common and substantial; constructed of imported or native materials</li> <li>Natural or constructed fords</li> <li>Bridges as needed for resource protection and appropriate access</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structures frequent and substantial; typically constructed of imported materials</li> <li>Constructed or natural fords</li> <li>Bridges as needed for resource protection and user convenience</li> <li>Trailside amenities may be present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structures frequent or continuous; typically constructed of imported materials</li> <li>May include bridges, boardwalks, curbs, handrails, trailside amenities, and similar features</li> </ul>
<b>Signs<sup>2</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route identification signing limited to junctions</li> <li>Route markers present when trail location is not evident</li> <li>Regulatory and resource protection signing infrequent</li> <li>Destination signing, unless required, generally not present</li> <li>Information and interpretive signing generally not present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route identification signing limited to junctions</li> <li>Route markers present when trail location is not evident</li> <li>Regulatory and resource protection signing infrequent</li> <li>Destination signing typically infrequent outside of wilderness; generally not present in wilderness</li> <li>Information and interpretive signing not common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route identification signing at junctions and as needed for user reassurance</li> <li>Route markers as needed for user reassurance</li> <li>Regulatory and resource protection signing may be common</li> <li>Destination signing likely outside of wilderness; generally not present in wilderness</li> <li>Information and interpretive signs may be present outside of wilderness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route identification signing at junctions and as needed for user reassurance</li> <li>Route markers as needed for user reassurance</li> <li>Regulatory and resource protection signing common</li> <li>Destination signing common outside of wilderness; generally not present in wilderness</li> <li>Information and interpretive signs may be common outside of wilderness</li> <li>Accessibility information likely displayed at trailhead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Route identification signing at junctions and for user reassurance</li> <li>Route markers as needed for user reassurance</li> <li>Regulatory and resource protection signing common</li> <li>Destination signing common</li> <li>Information and interpretive signs common</li> <li>Accessibility information likely displayed at trailhead</li> </ul>
<b>Typical Recreation Environments &amp; Experience<sup>2</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural, unmodified</li> <li>ROS: Typically Primitive to Roaded Natural</li> <li>WROS: Typically Primitive to Semi-Primitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural, essentially unmodified</li> <li>ROS: Typically Primitive to Roaded Natural</li> <li>WROS: Typically Primitive to Semi-Primitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural, primarily unmodified</li> <li>ROS: Typically Primitive to Roaded Natural</li> <li>WROS: Typically Semi-Primitive to Transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May be modified</li> <li>ROS: Typically Semi-Primitive to Rural</li> <li>WROS: Typically Portal or Transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May be highly modified</li> <li>Commonly associated with visitor centers or high-use recreation sites</li> <li>ROS: Typically Roaded Natural to Urban</li> <li>Generally not present in wilderness</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> For National Quality Standards for Trails, Potential Appropriateness of Trail Classes for Managed Uses, Design Parameters, and other related guidance, refer to FSM 2353, FSH 2309.18, and other applicable agency references.



United States Department of Agriculture



U.S. Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration

## Trail Fundamentals and Trail Management Objectives



Forest Service

Washington Office  
Recreation, Heritage and Volunteer Resources

1623-3901--MTDC  
Updated September 2016

### FOREST SERVICE REFERENCE MATERIALS

The Forest Service has many established reference documents and standards that can be readily applied to support collaboration on any trail segment designation, development, and management for the Merced River Trail, including specific trail classification and management objectives standards.



# GOAL 3

*Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.1

*Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.2

*Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trail heads*

## ACTION 3.3

*Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges*

## ACTION 3.4

*Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives*

## ACTION 3.5

*Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor*

## ACTION 3.1 //

***Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon.***

### OVERVIEW

As part of the vision planning process, the Merced River Trail Community Working Group (CWG), with support from Planning Department staff coordinated the Merced River Trail Community Speaker + Engagement Series. Imagined as an opportunity to both bring stakeholders together to provide input on the trail project, and to learn from local experts about the various topics of interest that concern the trail, the program was successful in both regards, contributing to the longstanding sense of connection to and stewardship for the river and canyon that many Mariposans share. Continuing and expanding this program would further deepen that connection, maintain enthusiasm for trail implementation efforts, and provide a place to share information about the resource.

This could include research findings, specialized reports, new concerns, and could be similar to the Merced River Trail Community Speaker + Engagement Series. Topics could include reports on cultural and historic uses of the canyon by people with recognized expertise in those areas. Additionally, materials relevant to the history and natural history of the Merced River watershed, including scientific research and reports, could be collected and archived in appropriate physical and digital spaces, such as at the County Library and under the auspices of the potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1.

### NEXT STEPS

The CWG and Planning Department staff implemented the Community Speaker + Engagement series, and would be well positioned to assume responsibilities for coordinating Action 3.1. Eventually, at least some of this programmatic activity would likely fall to the organization identified in Action 8.1

Importantly, this recommendation aligns well with a similar recommendation in the Mariposa County Creative Placemaking Strategy (CPS; 2021), which recommends establishing an Art + Environment Lecture Series with many similarities to the Merced River Trail Community Speaker + Engagement Series. This offers a compelling synergy, and an opportunity to collaborate with the Mariposa County Arts Council, the County's collaborator in the developing the CPS.

### TIMELINE

This action is an impactful, relatively low-barrier next step that can be implemented by existing project partners. While there may be a short lag to line up additional presenters and coordinate additional events, this action can and should take place soon after Vision Plan adoption.

# MERCED RIVER TRAIL

## COMMUNITY SPEAKER + ENGAGEMENT SERIES

// share // learn // discover // discuss //



**IRENE A. VASQUEZ** // Secretary, American Indian Council of Mariposa County (Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation)  
Irene A. Vasquez is the secretary for the American Indian Council of Mariposa County (Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation) and an expert in eco-cultural uses of native plants. Learn about the river canyon's place in generations of indigenous history, while shaping the Merced River Trail Vision Plan's guiding vision and aspirations.

El Portal Community Hall  
February 26 // 6:30 PM



**LOCAL BOTANY EXPERTS** // several residents with ranging expertise in local botanical topics  
With so many botanical experts in our community, it was too hard to pick just one. Instead, join one of many local botany experts on a guided walk along the existing Merced River Trail to enjoy and learn about the spring wildflower bloom, and share your thoughts on the vision plan's primary goals.

Briceburg Visitor Center  
April 19 // 9:00 AM



**ROB GRASSO** // aquatic ecologist, Yosemite National Park  
Rob Grasso will share his expertise in the river corridor's unique habitat for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, as well as considerations to be made in the trail planning process for ensuring its protection. Then, we will discuss your thoughts on the vision plan's primary goals.

Online Meeting  
December 14// 4:30 PM



**RALPH MENDERSHAUSEN** // community activist  
Speaking from his wealth of personal experience, Ralph Mendershausen will share his knowledge of the river canyon's history of locally organized conservation action, and its legacy and implications for the Merced River Trail and the vision plan effort. An open house discussion will follow

Online Meeting  
March 29th// 4:30 PM

The Merced River Trail Community Speaker + Engagement Series is produced by the Mariposa County Planning Department, with assistance from the Upper Merced River Watershed Coalition and National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program.



### RECOMMENDATIONS 4



## 6 ART + ENVIRONMENT LECTURE SERIES

Artists' lectures invite the public to learn about an artists' inspirations, practice, process and messaging which in turn expands the community's understanding and appreciation of an artist, their work, and how their work is situated in the larger canon.

For audience participants, hearing directly from an artist can be a profound experience and can radically shift opinions of an artist's work, inspire creativity and instill a deep respect for the power of art in society.

Artists and designers have always been inspired to respond

to and interact with nature through their art, thus the canon of environmental art is vast and varied. Considering the importance the community of Mariposa places on the region's natural landscape and the clear desire to leverage art to explore new ideas, increase exposure to a wide spectrum of artistic

expression, and utilize art for community engagement voiced in the online survey, an Art + Environment Lecture series aligns well with community feedback. Additionally, it would also expand the public's imagination regarding the potential for future creative placemaking projects connected to the natural environment.

123 // Programs: Arts + Environment Lecture

## LOCAL PRECEDENT AND ASPIRATIONS

The community has expressed a desire for environmental engagement and education programs in other recent community planning efforts, including the development of the Creative Placemaking Strategy (right).

The Merced River Trail Community Speaker + Engagement Series (left) provides a strong foundation on which to build a presentation program.



# GOAL 3

*Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.1

*Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.2

*Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trail heads*

## ACTION 3.3

*Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges*

## ACTION 3.4

*Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives*

## ACTION 3.5

*Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor*

## ACTION 3.2 //

***Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trail heads.***

### OVERVIEW

Concentrating trailhead functions like navigational, interpretive, and advisory signage in areas that have already been impacted is an obvious way to ensure that trail users have the information needed to enjoy the trail without degrading the landscape. Locations could include sites such as Briceburg and Railroad Flat in Bureau of Land Management (BLM) jurisdiction, and Dry Gulch and Dirt Flat campgrounds in US Forest Service (USFS) jurisdiction.

Additionally, the messaging on these signage features can equip trail users to recreate responsibly and act as stewards for the landscape, by practicing Leave No Trace principles of outdoor recreation, knowing how to identify hazardous plants and animals, and being prepared for potentially difficult conditions—especially in the warmer and drier months. Content could also relate to trail etiquette, safety and sanitation, and where appropriate, topics of interest in the river canyon, such as history and natural resources. Signage/kiosks could also include comment boxes and dog waste bags dispensers, and could be used to support the enforcement objectives identified in Action 4.4.

Finally, as detailed in Action 7.1, these elements have the ability to contribute to (or detract from) the river canyon and trail's aesthetic qualities and interpretive story. Both physically (in terms of scale and materiality) and conceptually (in terms of their storytelling content), public information elements must be consistent with the community's values established through the vision process and articulated throughout the Vision Plan.

### NEXT STEPS

Coordinating with the relevant federal land manager for each signage location is critical for this step. Agencies have their own standards for signage and informational elements, so coordination is important to provide a shared vision that maintains uniformity and consistency throughout the corridor. Collaboration between local trail advocates, including the Merced River Trail Community Working Group, and federal partners is a logical next step for advancing this action in the short-term. Its important to note that in May 2022, the California Wilderness Coalition produced a report on recommended strategies for improving signage through the Highway 140 corridor, with an emphasis on the US Forest Service day use and campground areas in this corridor (Appendix L). This report could be a valuable tool for local and federal partners working to implement this action.

### TIMELINE

According to the Cal Wild report, “by leveraging and improving upon the existing infrastructure, durable, accurate, and welcoming signage could be installed without any additional permits...(a)streamlined approach (that) has the potential to positively impact visitor experience within 1-2 years.”



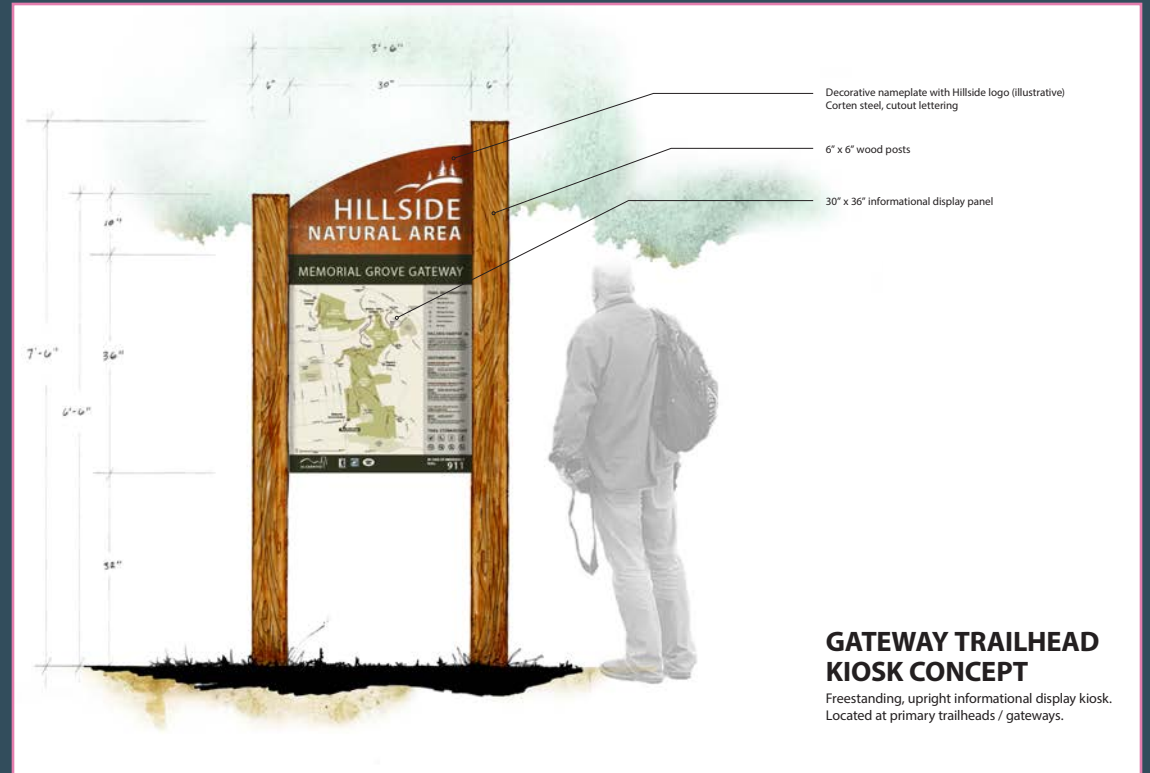
Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge (OR)



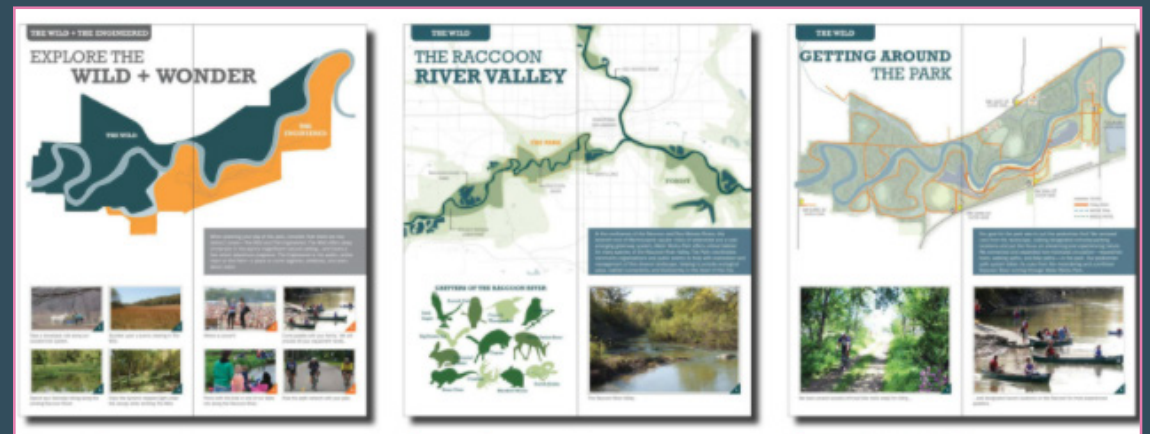
Community of Tehaleh (WA)

#### SITE-APPROPRIATE SIGNAGE FORMATS

Public information elements can take on a variety of scales and mediums, from prominent trailhead signage to smaller trailside exhibits to online and print brochures.



City of El Cerrito (CA)



Water Works Park (IA)



# GOAL 3

*Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.1

*Continue a program of producing and disseminating information, such as studies, films, and public presentations, so that the public has ongoing access to research on these resources of the Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 3.2

*Develop and locate riverside sites to provide public information such as a brochure, signage, or a kiosk, with a mandate to minimize and concentrate them at existing trail heads*

## ACTION 3.3

*Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges*

## ACTION 3.4

*Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives*

## ACTION 3.5

*Consult with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities to determine their preferences for protecting and, if desired, sharing their cultural heritage in the Merced River corridor*

## ACTION 3.3 //

***Establish principles of trail maintenance that stress use of basic natural materials, and minimize scenic impacts for trails and bridges.***

### OVERVIEW

Designing, building, and maintaining the trail are all foundational components of its potential impact on the many resources in the river canyon. Care must be taken to ensure that the trail is designed and installed in ways that resist adverse impacts from regular use, promote sustainable recreation (e.g. discourage social trails and protect sensitive areas), and align with the preferred aesthetic character. Establishing these principles is likely best achieved through a dedicated planning effort that intentionally links trail maintenance and construction to other recommendations in the Action Plan. In particular, it would be essential to connect trail work with Action 7.2, which specifies trail maintenance as a target area for maximizing the role of volunteers and local trail stewards.

Such a plan could include special design and implementation considerations that have emerged through the visioning effort. For example, trail design and maintenance should acknowledge that unique rules or considerations may apply to materials used for potential bridges, where more permanent materials such as steel and concrete may be appropriate. In all cases, minimizing scenic impact will be paramount, as will ensuring alignment with established agency policies and guidance for trail specifications.

The plan could also capture the recommendation that Mariposa County establish new positions, likely within the Parks and Recreation Department, dedicated to trail work and maintenance. These positions, which would be seasonal and only open during the cooler months, would mirror the seasonal trail work schedule in Yosemite (which is during the warmer months), allowing expert trail builders in the area to piece together year-round employment by working seasonally in the higher and lower elevations of the watershed.

### NEXT STEPS

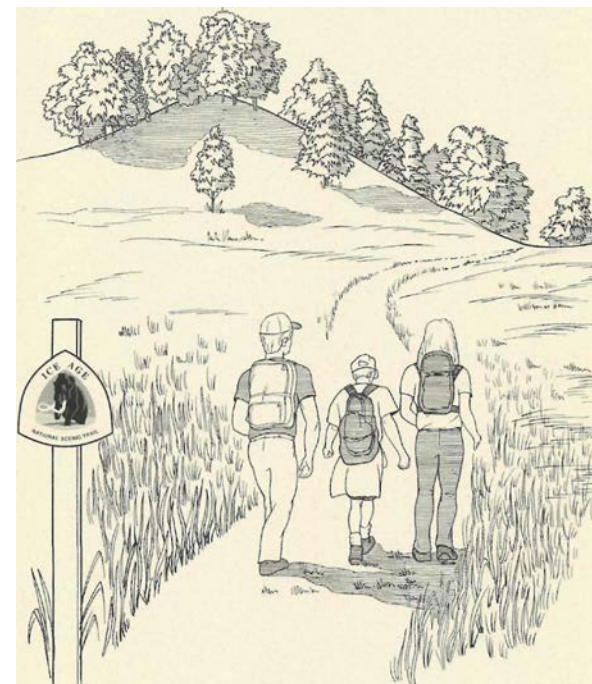
Advancing Action 3.3 could be one area where the Merced River Trail Community Working Group (CWG) immediately contributes to implementing the Vision Plan. Because the trail takes place entirely in federal land, trail design parameters must comply with applicable federal guidelines, such as USFS Standard Trail Plans and Specifications, 2016, the BLM Handbook 9114-1, Trails, and NPS Trail Guidelines. The CWG could begin synthesizing and mastering these materials prior to consulting and collaborating with the respective agencies to ensure that the community's preferred MRT trail design standards align with the existing federal guidance and requirements.

### TIMELINE

With the completion of the Vision Plan, the CWG's responsibilities will shift from facilitating the development of the plan to facilitating the plan's implementation. Assigning this action to the group or a sub-committee of the group could occur immediately after adoption of the Vision Plan, with production time varying depending on level of rigor and number of members involved in the activity.

STANDARDS (DESIRED)	ROS CLASS		
	URBAN	RURAL + ROADED NATURAL	SEMPIRIMITIVE
TREAD WIDTH	48"	24"	18"
CLEARING WIDTH	24"	12"	12"
CLEARING HEIGHT	10'	8'	8'
SLOPE (MAX. SUSTAINED)	10%	10%	15%
SLOPE (MAX.)	15% FOR 100'	20% FOR 100'	30% FOR 100'
CROSS SLOPE (MAX.)	3%	5%	8%
SURFACES	ASPHALT, CONCRETE, STABILIZED AGGREGATE, SCREENING, WOOD CHIP, SOD	NATIVE, WOOD CHIP STABILIZED AGGREGATE, SCREENING	NATIVE, STABILIZED AGGREGATE

## ICE AGE NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL



### A HANDBOOK for TRAIL DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION and MAINTENANCE

National Park Service • Wisconsin Department of\* Natural Resources • Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation

#### TRAIL DESIGN PRECEDENT AND RESOURCES

Though highly unique in many respects, the Merced River Trail can benefit from models established by comparable trail design initiatives, and their outcomes. For example, the guidance for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail offers dimensions and design guidelines for two classes of trail type that are relevant for the Merced River Trail.



# GOAL 3

*Conserve the cultural, historic, natural, and scenic resources of the Merced River canyon*

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***Establish permanent coordination of trail stewardship resources to collect, organize, and facilitate trail monitoring tasks related to litter, wildlife impacts, and other resource protection objectives.***

### OVERVIEW

The vision planning process has indicated a deep concern among Mariposans that current and anticipated increases in non-motorized recreational use of the Merced River Trail could jeopardize the human and non-human resources that make the trail and canyon special. Although there are presently efforts to help protect these resources (especially those supported by the Bureau of Land Management in the lower areas of the canyon), Vision Plan participants identified a need for organizing, directing, and expanding upon these efforts—both to be effective in the context of current trail use patterns, and to anticipate a future with more intensive trail use.

At least initially, these trail stewards would primarily be docent-like volunteers, who could conduct monitoring activities like documenting and removing litter, recording any conflicts with wildlife, and observing any sensitive habitat areas to ensure temporary or long-term protection of these trail locations. Eventually, however, it would be valuable to either have paid staff that perform rigorous routine monitoring activities, and/or to contract out professional monitoring and research activities to ensure that resource protection activities are of a quality commensurate with the resources that are being protected. In the event that professional monitoring services are contracted, volunteers could maintain associated devices like remote sensing hardware.

### NEXT STEPS

In the short-term, local non-profits—many of which, like the Upper Merced River Watershed Council, Mariposa Trails, and Mariposa Resource Conservation District (which is not a non-profit but has a similar governance model), are or have in the past carried out these kinds of monitoring activities ad hoc—can continue performing them, with an emphasis on collecting and sharing information.

However, as with many recommendations associated with Goal 3, this action would best be implemented through the kind of dedicated, staffed conservancy agency imagined and described in Action 8.1. Such an organization would be instrumental in facilitating implementation of trail monitoring tasks, especially in coordinating monitoring activities that cross boundaries between NPS, BLM, and USFS jurisdictions. This organization could effectively train and mobilize volunteers to conduct resource management activities, and pursue funding to hire and manage professionals if appropriate.

### TIMELINE

Progress on the short-term next steps identified above could be implemented immediately after Board adoption of the Vision Plan. However, the long-term next steps should be under the auspices of a potential conservancy organization that does not yet exist, and would need to be established to have long-term success.

## Respect Other Trail Users and Adjacent Landowners

### #1. Know and Follow the Rules

✓	✗
- Dogs on leash	- Unauthorized vehicles
- E-bikes in accordance with BC Motor Assisted Cycle Regulation	- Overnight camping
	- Open fires

### #2. Stay Right - Pass Left

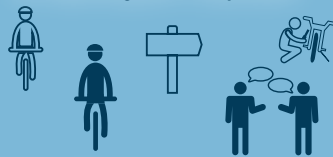


### #3. Mind your Pets

Keep dogs on short leash and pick up after them.



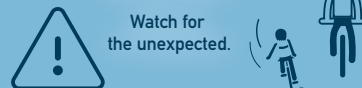
### #4. Standing Still? Step Aside



### #5. Use Safe Speeds



### #6. Be Alert



Respect private property and farmlands. Please do not trespass.

## Respect and Care for the Trail Environment

Every trail user can help protect the trailside environment. The native vegetation and shoreline areas are part of the natural beauty and particularly sensitive.



Stay on Trail  
Keep off steep banks to prevent erosion.  
Keep dogs on a leash, and on-trail to avoid spreading weed seeds.

Use Waste Receptacles (find locations on interactive map)



Watch ahead and leave space for nature.



Consider joining the Friends of Okanagan Rail Trail Trail Stewards in caring for this greenway.



## Volunteer for the Trail

If you are passionate about the trail, consider volunteering with the Friends of Okanagan Rail Trail and help with:

- Welcoming users
- Caring for the trailside environment
- Fundraising for amenities and improvements
- Keeping our communities engaged with this treasured corridor.

Email [volunteer@okanaganrailtrail.ca](mailto:volunteer@okanaganrailtrail.ca) to learn more.

FORT volunteers work on the trail as Trail Ambassadors or Trail Stewards.



Meeting, Greeting, Providing Direction, Modelling Etiquette, Listening

Planning and Training, Pulling weeds, Caretaking the corridor



FORT volunteers also work behind the scenes for:

### Project Fundraising:

Fundraising Campaigns, Grant Writing, Donor Relations

### Trail Improvements:

Planning and Project Management

### FORT Communications:

Spreading the word and sharing the stories using website, social media, media, newsletter, presentations

## Donate to Make Your Trail even Better!

The Okanagan Rail Trail would not have been possible without public donations. While the trailbase is now fully funded, there are many desirable improvements in the long term plan.

All it takes is two 'clicks' to make trail improvements happen:

<https://okanaganrailtrail.ca/donate/>

Tax receipt provided for donations over \$25.



Okanagan Rail Trail (BC)

## SUPPORTING TRAIL STEWARDSHIP

Supporting and collaborating with a local non-profit friends group can help support a variety of volunteer trail stewardship services and programs, including opportunities for trail maintenance, funding, consistent messaging around trail etiquette and safety, and resource protection.



# GOAL 3

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### OVERVIEW

Native American Tribes are vibrant current and relevant cultural communities with ancient integral bonds with the lands on which they live. The opportunity to consult with those that have this deep localism presents an opportunity to enrich the outcomes of projects like the Merced River Trail.

It also requires great respect. The destruction of Native lifeways during the Colonial, Manifest Destiny, and racial inequality eras are painfully recent, and trauma from disease, violence and systematic cultural erasure continue to complicate relations between Indigenous and predominantly non-Indigenous communities. To respect and preserve sacred sites and cultural resources, federal and state governments have, in partnership with Native Americans, established legal requirements for tribal consultation which should guide tribal efforts related to the Merced River Trail. The most important of these in the context of the Merced River and Southern Sierra Miwuk are SB 18 and AB 52 administered by the California Native American Heritage Committee and related to the California Environmental Quality Act. The local lead agencies will be familiar with the process and will require project location and accurate detailed project description.

Many sacred tribal sites and cultural resource locations are privately known only to the local tribe and trusted subject matter experts. Consultation between the lead agency and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers can bring those sites to light for the project applicant. If cultural resources are found, consultation between project proponent, lead agency and tribal entity can ensue until mitigating measures and mutual agreements can be made. However, at times, mitigation and agreement are difficult or impossible. This is a reality that project proponents must acknowledge, and understand that tribal communities must protect their sacred sites and ancestral burials. Cultural sensitivity to complex tribal communities can help move through potential impasses.

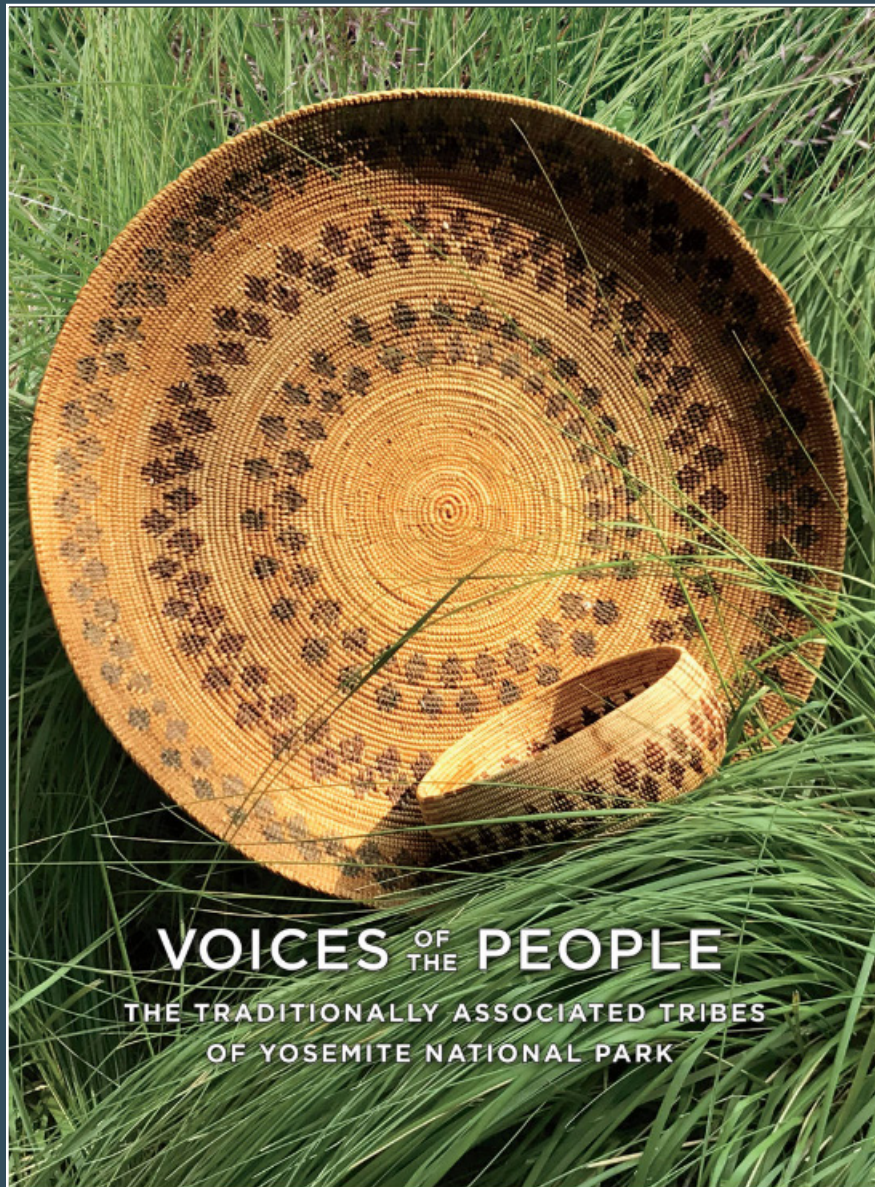
### NEXT STEPS

Preliminary research and relationship building are initial best practices when overlaying a community vision on a long-established landscape. The Southern Sierra Miwuk would like to be consulted early and often, then continually involved in any effort along the Merced River Trail. If any discoveries of artifacts or human remains are made, those involved in the trail project should contact the Southern Sierra Miwuk immediately. The Tribe supports design recommendations that evoke an attitude of contemplation, reverence, spirituality and respect. The Miwuk are willing to share their cultural heritage under these premises and pending tribal staff approval.

### TIMELINE

Informal tribal consultation has taken place in the development of the Vision Plan, and should be formalized prior to implementing the Action Plan's recommendations.





## VOICES OF THE PEOPLE

Published in 2021, “Voices of the People: the Traditionally Associated Tribes of Yosemite National Park” presents a compelling precedent for a predominantly non-Indigenous community/government—in this case Yosemite National Park—collaborating with and centering Indigenous perspectives, insights, and voices in the Greater Yosemite region. The content of this book, and in particular, the process that created it, is instructive for future and ongoing engagement between the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and other concerned Native American communities, Mariposa County, its non-Indigenous community, and affected federal agencies with regard to the Merced River Trail.



# GOAL 4

*Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation*

## ACTION 4.1

*Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies*

## ACTION 4.2

*Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife*

## ACTION 4.3

*Ensure that the trail is designed and maintained by agency-appropriate standard trail plans and specifications to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with agency requirements for natural surfacing*

## ACTION 4.4

*Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses*

## ACTION 4.5

*Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads*

## ACTION 4.6

*Support agency partners in the study, evaluation, and future mitigation needs for issues of law enforcement, fire issues, human waste and trash, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services, commensurate with future use*

## ACTION 4.1 //

***Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies.***

### OVERVIEW

In addition to partnerships with federal land managers who are undertaking related conservation and restoration work in the river canyon and adjacent areas (identified in Action 6.3), non-governmental agencies, including local/regional universities and non-profits, could serve as strong collaborators for helping achieve the Merced River Trail's ecosystem health objectives. In particular, non-profits like the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, which has a track record of organizing volunteers for restoration activities, and universities like UC Merced, where research units like the Sierra Nevada Research Institute conduct similar work throughout the San Joaquin Valley and Sierra Nevada regions, stand out as potential high-capacity partners for studying, monitoring, and implementing projects that support federal and local ecosystem health aspirations.

While additional planning and collaborative decision making will be necessary to identify consensus priority projects, initial work might include: controlling/eradicating yellow star-thistle and Italian thistle from the river canyon; American bullfrog removal; and ranging efforts to reintroduce anadromous fish to the Merced River watershed. With federal land managers engaging with these issues to varying extents, it is critical to consult with BLM, USFS, and NPS partners to understand the gaps and opportunities for the trail project to contribute to these and other restoration efforts.

### NEXT STEPS

Trail advocates, initially spearheaded by the Merced River Trail Community Working Group, should first identify priority university and non-profit partners, and develop a strategy for engaging with them to advance this action. Once university and non-profit partnerships are established, trail advocates—perhaps led by the potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1—can facilitate further collaboration among non-governmental partners and the federal agencies to prioritize ecosystem health needs, and determine a strategy for addressing them among the partnership.

### TIMELINE

Initial university and non-profit partner identification and engagement can begin shortly after the Vision Plan is adopted.



## Impacts to Wildlife: Managing Visitors and Resources to Protect Wildlife

### CONTRIBUTING PAPER

Prepared for the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council  
March 2019, Edition One

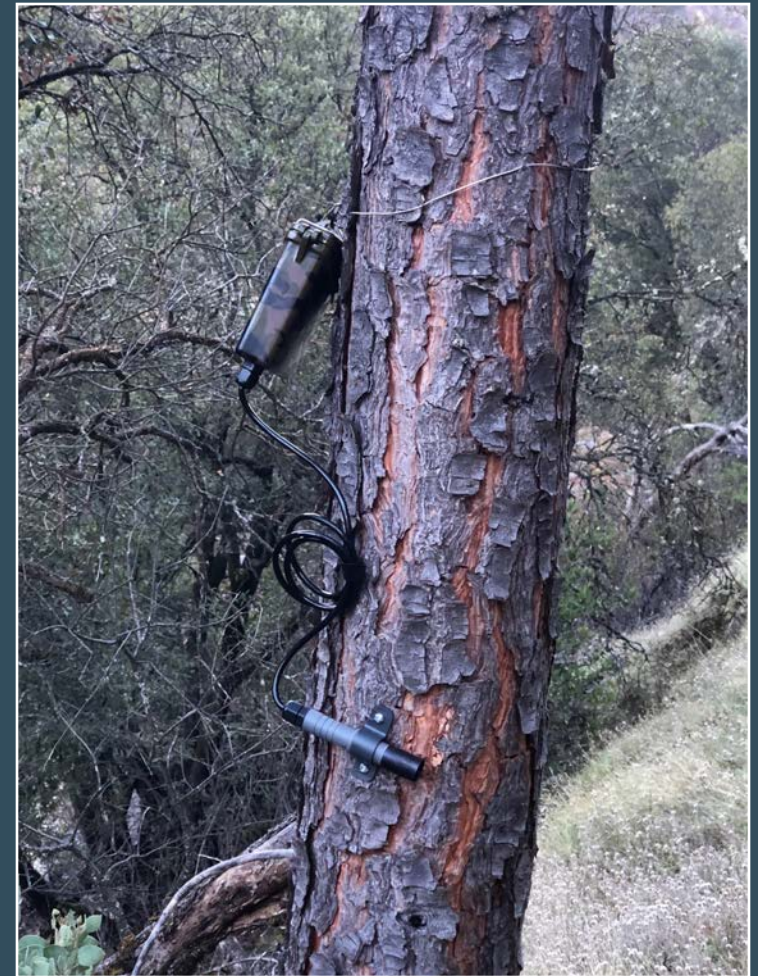
**JEFFREY L. MARION**  
RECREATION ECOLOGIST, U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

#### Introduction.

Recreational visitation and associated economic contributions made to local and state economies provide a powerful catalyst for conserving public lands. Recreation enhances societal conservation and stewardship values. However, most protected natural areas, including parks, forests, rangelands, and wildlife refuges, are managed under a dual mandate to preserve predominantly natural settings and processes while also accommodating recreational visitation. Visitor activities can have deleterious impacts to protected area vegetation, soil, water, wildlife, and cultural resources (Hammit et al. 2015; Marion et al. 2016).

The term impact denotes undesirable visitor-related effects to natural resources and/or wildlife. While managers seek to eliminate avoidable impacts, such as cutting trees for firewood or feeding wildlife, they must also minimize unavoidable impacts, such as trampling plants on trails and recreation sites (Marion 2016). Professional land and recreation managers and planners increasingly seek to identify unacceptable types and levels of visitor-related impacts by defining standards or “thresholds of change,” which, when exceeded, prompt corrective management actions.

This paper reviews the management of recreation impacts to wildlife, including discussions of influential factors, impact indicators, and the range of management responses. This information is provided to assist recreation and land managers in avoiding or minimizing visitor impact to wildlife, particularly related to decisionmaking within the “Visitor Use Management Framework” (IVUMC 2016b). Such decisionmaking requires a thorough understanding of the different types of wildlife impact and the use-related, environmental, and managerial factors that influence them. Recreation access and management decisionmaking related to wildlife conservation require assessments of costs and benefits, generally on unit and regional scales.



*Merced River Recreation Management Area (CA)*

#### BEST PRACTICES AND FIELD STUDY

University and institutional partners can contribute to the long-term planning and implementation of the trail by disseminating research to shape decisions around trail management, and conducting empirical site specific research on crucial topics like visitor use, ecological conditions, and cultural resources.



# GOAL 4

*Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation*

## ACTION 4.1

*Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies*

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*Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife*

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*Ensure that the trail is designed and maintained by agency-appropriate standard trail plans and specifications to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with agency requirements for natural surfacing*

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*Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses*

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*Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads*

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*Support agency partners in the study, evaluation, and future mitigation needs for issues of law enforcement, fire issues, human waste and trash, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services, commensurate with future use*

## ACTION 4.2 //

### ***Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife.***

#### OVERVIEW

Understanding past and present distributions of wildlife that intersect existing and candidate trail routes is critical for identifying, avoiding, and mitigating trail impacts. Wildlife occurrence and use data informs appropriate trail routing, mitigation, and enhancement measures. Geospatial data for wildlife species can be obtained from: research and professional contemporary surveys (occurrence, telemetry, remote sensing), species observational data repositories (like California Natural Diversity Database for rare plants and animals), historic records (like university databases), community science applications (like iNaturalist) and compilation databases of multiple data types (like CalFlora). When combined with visitor use data, such as surveys, trail cameras, trail counters, or data obtained from applicable federal agencies, this information provides critical insights about impacts of trail use on wildlife behavior or species distribution over time and key adaptive management information.

Of note, each federal agency with jurisdiction in the river canyon is mandated to comply with all current laws, regulations, and federal agency guidelines relating to wildlife protection/management. This includes required monitoring and mitigation measures. Accordingly, wildlife evaluation and the development of mitigation measures should take place in close consultation with BLM, USFS, and NPS to collaboratively implement this action.

#### NEXT STEPS

Working with federal partners, trail advocates should commission an initial study of key wildlife (Threatened or Endangered species, Species of Concern, or any other key species and Outstandingly Remarkable Values) intersecting existing and candidate trails. The initial study should map wildlife hotspots of diversity and activity, enumerate potential trail impacts to wildlife, and prioritize opportunities to enhance species connectivity and habitat. Trail advocates should also collate relevant examples of innovative trail design and mitigation measures, such as: elevated trail segments for amphibians; seasonal closures, re-routing, or signage for sensitive locations/habitats; and trail routing that maximizes connectivity and minimizes disruption of identified key wildlife. Finally, project partners should develop a strategy to fill information gaps. This could be coordinated data collection by local non-profit community science groups, but professional data collection, analysis, and mapping, perhaps from lead federal agency partners, should also be prioritized. All data collection requires funding and resource support, so adequate fundraising organizations (e.g. the organization described in Action 8.1) will also play a role.

#### TIMELINE

With sufficient funding, a consultant-assisted recreation ecology report, compiling existing available data, identifiable conflicts/impacts, key data and study needs, potential mitigation options, and species/habitat enhancement opportunities could begin within months of adoption of the Vision Plan. Once initiated, it could be completed in 12-18 months.

Explore

Community

More

Observations

Sierra Newt

Location

Go

Filters

The World

529 OBSERVATIONS

1 SPECIES

185 IDENTIFIERS

302 OBSERVERS

Map

Grid

List

Places of Interest

Redo search in map

+

-

📍

📏

Forestá

El Portal

Incline

Mile Cove

Yosemite

El Portal

Sierra Newt

(*Taricha sierrae*)

El Dorado County, CA • Nov 14, 2014

Research Grade

2

12d

Sierra Newt

(*Taricha sierrae*)

Nevada County, US... • Nov 16, 2020

Research Grade

2

1mo

Sierra Newt

(*Taricha sierrae*)

Grass Valley, CA 9... • Nov 15, 2020

Research Grade

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Sierra Newt

(*Taricha sierrae*)

Nevada County, US... • Oct 29, 2020

Research Grade

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Sierra Newt

**OBSERVATION + MITIGATION**  
 Crowd-sourced citizen science tools like iNaturalist can economically provide high-quality data about wildlife use patterns, and allow project partners to target appropriate countermeasures, from signage to trail design to trail location, for limiting trail users' impact on key species.



Town of Whistler (BC)



Sierra National Forest (CA)



Yosemite National Park (CA)



# GOAL 4

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### OVERVIEW

Other than 3.5 miles of Incline Road, which are paved to provide access to existing USFS recreation amenities and the community of Incline, the rest of the historic rail grade below the Foresta Road bridge (nearly 24 miles, including .3 temporarily paved miles around the Ferguson Rock Slide) is composed of a natural surface. As reflected in Action 3.3, the vision planning process revealed a near-universal belief among project participants that any new or enhanced trail along the historic rail grade be naturally surfaced (unpaved). This both aligns with the community's preferred rugged aesthetic, and can help moderate trail use and ensure that recreation activities have a limited impact on the river canyon's natural resources.

Mariposa County boasts many strong precedents for successful implementation and maintenance of this trail typology, including the existing segment of the Merced River Trail below Sweetwater Creek in BLM jurisdiction. There are also numerous examples of durable, naturally surfaced trails that are heavily used in Yosemite National Park. In both of these instances, trail design and maintenance activities adhere to agency guidelines, and sitework is carried out by both federal employees and qualified trail crews from organizations like the California Conservation Corps (CCC). These precedents provide compelling and inspiring case studies to shape the design and implementation of the Merced River Trail in ways that support the project's vision and goals.

### NEXT STEPS

Since the Merced River Trail already exists in BLM jurisdiction, any new trail in the corridor would be located in Stanislaus National Forest, making their partnership in new trail design essential to ensuring that agency standards and requirements are met. This element of Action 4.3 has significant overlap with Action 2.4. Locally, the trail partnership can work to confirm with USFS the dimensions, material selections, and other technical trail considerations that would be required (or recommended) by the agency prior to designing new trail in the future.

Maintenance activities require the collaboration of BLM and USFS, and any local groups or contractors/partners who may implement the sitework. Short-term next steps include developing and strengthening partnerships with potential partners such as the CCC, and identifying a strategy for funding current and future trail maintenance.

### TIMELINE

While the maintenance component of this action is ongoing and indefinite, the trail design aspects are a high-priority item which should commence upon adoption of the Vision Plan.





**QUALITY TRAIL CONSTRUCTION**  
Professional and semi-professional trail crews like those operated by the California Conservation Corps can be a high-quality supplement to agency trail crews for both constructing and maintaining the existing and future Merced River Trail in ways that align with federal requirements and local aesthetic priorities.

*Merced River Recreation Management Area (CA)*



# GOAL 4

*Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation*

## ACTION 4.1

*Identify opportunities through universities and non-profits to extend wildlife management and research activities such as invasive species eradication, native species reintroduction, wildlife species surveys, and potential extension of genetics studies*

## ACTION 4.2

*Identify and map wildlife use patterns, and evaluate appropriate and effective mitigation measures to avoid impacts of trail use on wildlife*

## ACTION 4.3

*Ensure that the trail is designed and maintained by agency-appropriate standard trail plans and specifications to reduce soil erosion, minimize the potential for social trails, and ensure compliance with agency requirements for natural surfacing*

## ACTION 4.4

*Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses*

## ACTION 4.5

*Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads*

## ACTION 4.6

*Support agency partners in the study, evaluation, and future mitigation needs for issues of law enforcement, fire issues, human waste and trash, illegal camping, and trail degradation, and seek funding/personnel to provide future services, commensurate with future use*

## ACTION 4.4 //

### ***Work with agency partners to develop effective physical and enforcement measures protecting the resource from unauthorized trail uses.***

#### OVERVIEW

Ensuring that the trail is not degraded by unauthorized users, especially off-highway vehicles like dirt bikes, is a major current responsibility of BLM in the existing Merced River Trail corridor. Doing so requires a combination of physical elements, signage and education, and diligent trail planning to prevent inadvertently establishing connections between the Merced River Trail and adjacent public lands where these uses are permitted.

As the trail becomes increasingly popular, this important management task becomes both more important and more difficult, requiring more resources for and effective coordination among the federal agency partners who have jurisdiction over the trail's right of way. Depending on the agency's preferences and policies, they could either partner with local trail advocates to help devise, fund, and implement appropriate unauthorized use countermeasures, or simply delegate those responsibilities to a qualified local organization. In either case, the potential conservancy identified in Action 8.1 would be ideally suited to implement this action in partnership with the relevant federal agencies.

Regardless of the implementation pathway, it is important that these countermeasures align with existing agency approaches to managing recreational impacts in their jurisdiction. For example, Yosemite requires a permit to stay overnight in a campground or when camping in wilderness, enabling them to track trail usage and ensure that visitors return safely to their destination. Should the recommended route be pursued further, NPS would have to set up a system that permits trail users that begin their journey outside of the park, allows trail visitors to camp at Crane Flat Campground, and perhaps designate a special backpacking camp.

#### NEXT STEPS

In order to enforce policies that pertain to unauthorized uses, the project partnership first needs to clearly define what use types are authorized—by federal law and policy—on the Merced River Trail. This is an explicit outcome of Actions 5.1 and 5.3, which are necessary precursors of full implementation for Action 4.4. However, in the short term, partners can begin inventorying current best practices in enforcement from relevant regional and national precedents. These could include physical measures (like gates), informational measures (like signage), and other practices, all with an emphasis on aesthetic appropriateness for the Merced River canyon. This effort could be led by the Merced River Trail Community Working Group with support from county staff.

#### TIMELINE

While the timeline for full implementation is contingent on completing Actions 5.1 and 5.3, short-term next steps can begin immediately upon adoption of the Vision Plan, and could take as little as six months to complete.





Merced River Recreation Management Area (CA)



Sam Houston National Forest (TX)



Caprock Canyons State Park and Trailway (TX)

#### MEASURES FOR USE RESTRICTION

Land managers can apply a range of measures to ensure appropriate usage of the Merced River Trail, including various gate and fence-types that permit certain uses while discouraging others, and simple signage that clearly establishes use prohibitions.



Coconino National Forest (AZ)



# GOAL 4

*Prioritize watershed and ecosystem health, including fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as a core principle of trail planning and implementation*

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***Collaborate with agency partners to study, evaluate, and recommend mitigation measures for existing capacity, and limitations of current and future trail-supporting resources, including trash collection, bathrooms, and parking at the Briceburg and Bagby trailheads.***

### OVERVIEW

Quantifying the capacity of existing trail support elements is among the biggest gaps in the Merced River Trail partnership's understanding of the relationship between visitor use and the limits of the landscape. It is generally accepted that current infrastructure, including parking, comfort stations, trash collection, and other basic services, are extremely limited and restricted by physical and logistical constraints. However, though the river canyon's current use patterns are the subject of a year-long study by researchers at UC Merced (Appendix J), the limits of this infrastructure and the amount of use that they can support has not yet been determined.

Understanding current limits are important for protecting the river canyon's resources from visitor overuse. This understanding is also essential for forecasting the relationship between anticipated future use of the trail, and developing a strategy to mitigate future impacts from increased non-motorized multi-use recreation. A detailed and comprehensive grasp of the built and natural landscape's limits, in the context of reasonable and credible estimates for future visitation, is critical to effectively safeguard the trail's natural resources from visitor use.

For this study to be effective, it is imperative that federal and regional partners are closely involved with scoping and implementation. In particular, as operators of the trail's two primary trailheads, both BLM (Briceburg) and Merced Irrigation District (Bagby) should have prominent roles in sharing data, forecasting agency capacity, and other critical aspects of the study.

### NEXT STEPS

In the absence of funding to support this study, initial efforts could take place as a project for a student(s) with relevant education, such as a landscape architecture studio course or a masters project for a student in environmental planning or resource conservation. This path would align with Action 4.1.

Long-term, this action requires a formal and comprehensive study that would require funding and qualified professional expertise. This could be funded and managed by the Mariposa County Planning Department and CWG, an appropriate conservancy organization (such as the one identified in Action 8.1), or a partnership between the County and such an organization.

### TIMELINE

This is a high-priority action, implementation of which should commence immediately upon Vision Plan adoption.

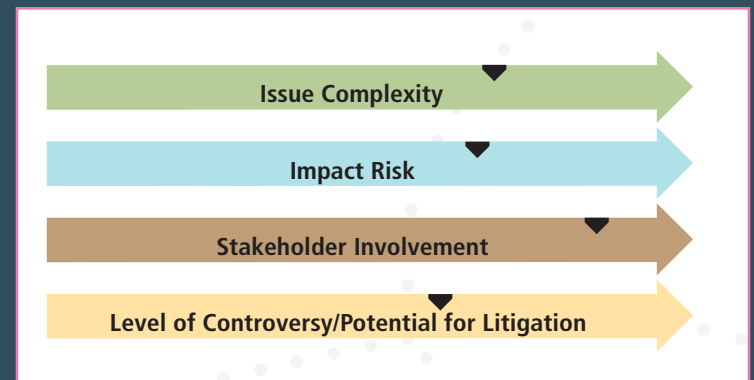
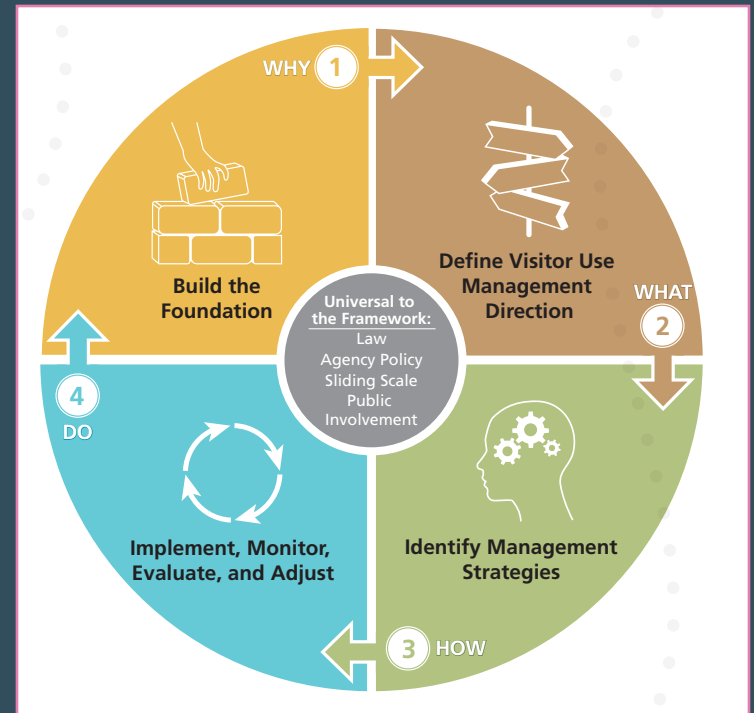


INTERAGENCY  
**VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT**  
COUNCIL

# Visitor Use Management Framework

A Guide to Providing Sustainable Outdoor Recreation

Edition One | July 2016



## INTERAGENCY VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT

A council of agency partners have been working to develop a universal framework to guide land managers seeking to address issues stemming from increased visitation and subsequent impacts to natural, cultural, and recreational resources on public lands.



# GOAL 4

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### OVERVIEW

As catastrophic wildfire becomes increasingly common and destructive, communities and land managers must integrate wildfire risk reduction into all aspects of civic life, including outdoor recreation planning. In the context of the Merced River Trail, reducing wildfire risk requires educating visitors about responsible recreation behaviors, designing recreation elements to reduce the risk and impact of future events should they occur, and enforcing use restrictions that exist to keep visitors and the landscape safe from disasters.

Not only should the future Merced River Trail avoid increasing the risk of wildfire in the river canyon, but it also provides the public with several opportunities to promote resiliency and adaptation objectives that help reduce wildfire risk elsewhere in the county. This includes potential benefits like new funding streams for vegetation management activities in the trail corridor and the potential for new trail segments to double as (or be located on) shaded fuel breaks and other fire control lines,

Additionally, the same principles for promoting safe and disaster-resilient recreation—education, mitigative design, and enforcement—pertain to minimizing other visitor use impacts, such as litter control and trail conservation. As land managers and other members of the trail partnership work to reduce wildfire risk in the trail corridor, they can simultaneously be working to resolve current (and anticipated) visitor use impacts, including longstanding issues like illegal camping and human waste.

### NEXT STEPS

Studying these impacts could be folded into the visitor use study described in Action 4.5. However, much of the on-the-ground implementation work for recommended mitigation measures, especially those related to law enforcement, will require new funding allocations from the budgets of affected federal agencies (BLM and USFS in particular), and/or through supplementary funds raised by other trail partners. At present, no services can be provided by federal land managers under current staffing levels, so this latter task is an ideal and important opportunity for the potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1. In the absence of additional resources for enforcement, mitigation efforts can focus on education related to Leave No Trace principles.

### TIMELINE

If incorporated into the implementation of Action 4.5, the study of these impacts and detailing the overlap between wildfire risk reduction and other visitor use impact mitigations could commence immediately after Vision Plan adoption. The timeline for implementing the study will depend on its specific recommendations.



*Detwiler Fire (2017)*



*Ferguson Fire (2018)*

#### WILDFIRE RISK REDUCTION

The Merced River Trail can be an additional avenue through which federal, state, and local partners can pursue funding and resources to implement vegetation management and fuels reduction projects needed to mitigate the likelihood and impact of future catastrophic wildfire in the Merced watershed.

#### VISITOR USE IMPACTS

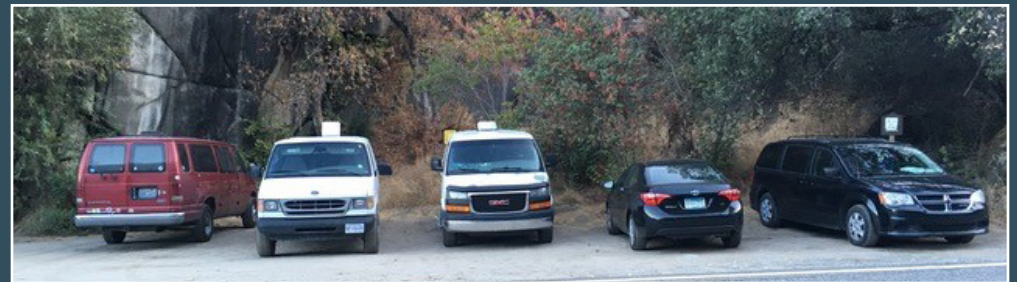
Mariposa County, Yosemite National Park, and the California Highway Patrol often struggle to address the impacts of out of bounds camping on areas along Highway 140 in the river canyon. While the river trail could exacerbate these and other related issues, the project also provides an opportunity to develop a collaborative approach for ensuring that additional users do not result in additional impacts.



*Regulatory signage along Incline Road*



*Remnants of an illegal fire and soiled toilet paper litter at the Caltrans sand pit*



*Illegal camping at Parkline Slab at the entrance to Yosemite*



# GOAL 5

*Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses*

## ACTION 5.1

*Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail*

## ACTION 5.2

*Seek written input from new user groups on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage*

## ACTION 5.3

*Develop and publish a use plan for major Merced River Trail river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments*

## ACTION 5.1 //

### ***Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail.***

#### OVERVIEW

The Merced River Trail will promote access along the trail corridor for a range of recreational opportunities, though specific allowances and restrictions per mode of travel may potentially differ by land agencies due to differences in policy, permitted use, or seasonal restrictions. Trail users need to have access to up-to-date, reliable, and official information about allowable public access, organized by travel mode, for the BLM and USFS units along the route (and potentially for the upstream route terminus in Yosemite National Park), including definitions of allowable use by type. This includes both current user types and potential future user types, such as group of overnight thru-hikers, day use beach goers, non-motorized bicycle technology (e-bikes), and equestrian users. Information also needs to be provided for vehicular travel on segments of the trail corridor shared with non-motorized users.

Initially, summary information for allowable public access along the trail corridor by each agency unit (Stanislaus National Forest, BLM Merced River Recreation Management Area); areas within units along the trail (BLM Wilderness Study Area); and trail access use guidelines across agencies pursuant to the river's Wild and Scenic designation would need to be collected, and confirmed for accuracy with the appropriate agency. Key documents to review include Wild and Scenic River management plans, resource management plans, and various applicable best management practices for each agency. Then, this information would need to be shared publicly to review and discuss as needed. Long-term, this information would need to be kept current through close monitoring and collaboration with the pertinent agencies.

#### NEXT STEPS

Initial information collection and summary could be led by citizen groups, including the Merced River Trail Community Working Group (CWG). The organization identified in Action 8.1 would be a logical candidate for leading the online distribution of this information, and ensuring that it is maintained and current.

#### TIMELINE

Upon Board adoption of the Vision Plan, the CWG's role will then shift to supporting the plan's implementation. At that point, the group could immediately pivot to working on the initial components of this action.





*Stanislaus National Forest (CA)*



*Merced River Recreation Management Area (CA)*



*City of Spokane (WA)*



*Yosemite National Park (CA)*

#### **CURRENT AND FUTURE NON-MOTORIZED USES**

Though primarily used by hikers and trail runners, the existing Merced River Trail currently receives moderate traffic from cyclists, and the river is a seasonal destination for whitewater paddlers. Current and future planning efforts will need to understand the needs of additional non-motorized uses, such as e-bikes and stock use, which are prevalent in other public lands in the region.



# GOAL 5

*Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses*

## ACTION 5.1

*Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail*

## ACTION 5.2

*Seek written input from new user groups on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage*

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*Develop and publish a use plan for major Merced River Trail river segments for permitted uses based primarily on land management policy and decisions regarding appropriate use of those segments*

## ACTION 5.2 //

***Seek written input from new user groups on the minimum adjustments to their needs required to establish and maintain their safe use of trail segments, addressing access issues, infrastructure, trail work, group size, sanitation, and signage.***

### OVERVIEW

A common refrain throughout the vision planning process was that some user groups would use the trail more frequently if many of the basic enhancements addressed elsewhere in the Action Plan were implemented. More clarity is needed on what those detailed enhancements are for specific user groups, especially equestrians and bikers. Once this input has been provided, land managers can evaluate the extent to which serving those needs is permissible, attainable, and desirable within existing trail and public governance.

While those determinations will likely involve various federal policy considerations that are outside the scope of the Merced River Trail Vision Plan, its worth reiterating important parameters for the trail that have been clearly established through this process:

- there is a local consensus and clear legal basis for an unpaved trail that is intended strictly for non-motorized recreational uses; and
- conservation and enhancement of the river canyon's ecological character is of the utmost importance for community members, and is enshrined in the Wild and Scenic River designations for the river in BLM and USFS jurisdiction

### NEXT STEPS

Soliciting, organizing, and disseminating the input from new user groups could be implemented by citizen groups, including the Merced River Trail CWG. Whomever is ultimately responsible for this action should consider reaching out to credible recreation advocacy organizations, such as the International Mountain Biking Association, Backcountry Horsemen of America, Trout Unlimited, and American Whitewater.

### TIMELINE

Implementation of this community-driven action can commence shortly after the Vision Plan is adopted, and could be completed fairly quickly depending on the responsiveness of recreation user groups.

# GOAL 5

*Assess the viability and impacts of additional non-motorized recreational users throughout the trail corridor, and implement strategies to maintain balance among different uses*

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*Review, summarize, and make publicly available current land management agency decisions determining public access on BLM, USFS, and NPS portions of the Merced River Trail*

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### OVERVIEW

A comprehensive use plan for the Merced River Trail would aggregate segments of similar policies and permitted uses by recreational use, designation, and trail class. In addition to including and synthesizing agency policies (as discussed in Action 5.1), the use plan should also align with the outcomes—including the vision statement, goals, and recommended actions—described in the Merced River Trail Vision Plan. This might entail seasonal prohibitions of certain uses in areas with high habitat value (Action 4.2) or cultural importance (Action 3.5). Regardless of content, an effective messaging approach for the use plan will be crucial—studies have shown that simple, direct, proscriptive messaging can have a greater impact on user compliance.

This use plan could take the form of a Memorandum of Agreement or Understanding with each federal agency that outlines appropriate/permitted uses within the trail area. This would require extensive consultation with the three federal agencies in the river canyon, especially the USFS, where key segments of the trail do not yet exist. Importantly, this agreement would be tiered from existing federal land management plans and regulations.

In order to simplify messaging on allowable uses, provide opportunities for trip planning and coordination, and increase the likelihood of compliance, trail segment use regulations should be presented in the context of the overall trail network. For instance, a map of the overall trail network might show color-coded segments that indicate trail class and uses, or the extent of the segment from a particular trailhead might be enlarged for detail about more specific uses or seasonal restrictions but remain linked to a reference map of all trail segments for an individual's planning purposes.

### NEXT STEPS

This action likely requires an expansive study, for which a qualified consultant team would be beneficial. It may be efficient to include other relevant recommendations, such as Actions 4.2 and 4.6, in the scope of this project. In the short-term, funding could be pursued by the County and the project could be led by the Planning Department with the support of the CWG and the partnership of BLM and USFS. Long-term, this effort could be driven and conducted by the potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1.

### TIMELINE

Once funded, conducting this planning project could take 12-24 months, depending on if the scope of the proposed planning process includes implementation of additional Action Plan recommendations.



# GOAL 6

*Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County*

## ACTION 6.1

*Expand and advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Creek Preserve Trail System*

## ACTION 6.2

*Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal land-owner agencies for design and feasibility of a "proposed Trail" in Merced Irrigation District's FERC Recreation Plan connecting the Merced River Trail from Bagby to McSwain Dam*

## ACTION 6.3

*Continue to collaborate with BLM, USFS, and NPS to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions*

## ACTION 6.1 //

### ***Expand and advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Creek Preserve Trail System.***

#### OVERVIEW

From its headwaters near Yosemite Oaks and Triangle Roads, Bear Creek flows through the community of Midpines and meeting the Merced River at Briceburg. Along the way, it roughly follows Highway 140 past Midpines County Park, several areas for camping and lodging, and four YARTS stops. The creek experiences several precipitous drops, creates popular swimming areas, and passes through breathtaking foothills landscapes.

For many years, Mariposans have imagined a trail along this route. In 2012, Friends of Bear Creek, Midpines (FBCM) formed to explore and advance the trail concept, pursuing support from the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program to develop a feasibility study. The study (included as Appendix D) makes several recommendations to progress trail planning and implementation.

Since that time, the trail has been identified as a priority in the Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Plan. Additionally, Midpines County Park, likely a major trailhead and potentially terminus of Bear Creek Trail, has been identified as a priority project in the Mariposa County Creative Placemaking Strategy. Now, the Merced River Trail Vision Plan has identified the Bear Creek Trail as a rare and impactful opportunity to achieve the community's vision for the MRT as the basis for a network of recreational trails throughout the county and watershed.

#### NEXT STEPS

The Mariposa County Planning Department could lead this effort, with support from the county's Parks and Recreation Department, who currently operate and maintain Midpines County Park. Though FBCM no longer exists, other local organizations, such as the Upper Merced River Watershed Council or Midpines Planning Advisory Committee, could fill many of that organization's former roles with respect to the Bear Creek Trail.

Local advocates seeking to advance this recommendation could approach it incrementally, pursuing additional RTCA support to revisit, build upon, and advance the recommendations from the previous study, and using the outcomes of that effort to begin trail implementation. Or, they could opt to pursue larger grants for planning and designing the trail, perhaps while also enhancing Midpines County Park as its primary trailhead.

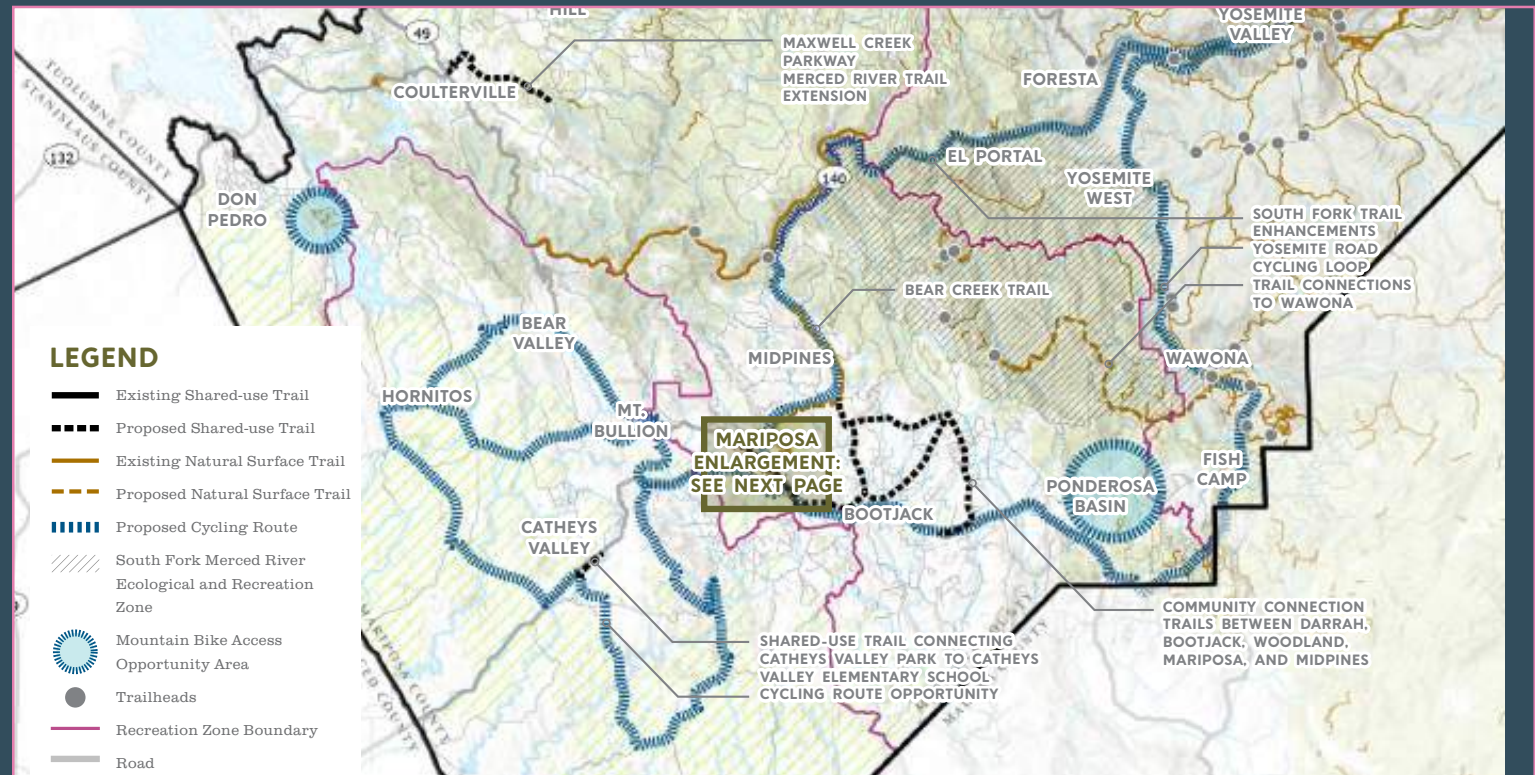
#### TIMELINE

Applications for RTCA support are due annually on March 1. If pursued, this option could likely result in a substantive deliverable within a year. Larger trail and trailhead planning efforts could take 24-36 months.

## PROPOSED TRAIL SYSTEM EXPANSION

### MULTI-BENEFICIAL VISION

In March 2021, the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors adopted the Mariposa Recreation and Resiliency Plan, which helps align the County's investments in parks, open space, and trails with climate change adaptation objectives like wildfire risk reduction. One of the core projects recommended in the plan is the development of a network of trails that could serve as destinations and conduits for the future users of the Merced River Trail.



### TAILORED TRAIL TYPOLOGIES

The Recreation and Resiliency Plan identifies four trail types for different typical conditions found within the County's proposed trail system expansion. Two of them—the river corridor condition and foothills condition—provide instructive case studies for the Merced River Trail's scale, dimensions, and physical characteristics.





# GOAL 6

*Integrate the Merced River Trail with existing and planned trails within Mariposa County*

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*Expand and advance efforts to implement the Bear Creek Trail from Midpines County Park to Briceburg, and from Midpines County Park to Stockton Creek Preserve Trail System*

## ACTION 6.2

*Study, research, and consult with local, state, and federal land-owner agencies for design and feasibility of a “proposed Trail” in Merced Irrigation District’s FERC Recreation Plan connecting the Merced River Trail from Bagby to McSwain Dam*

## ACTION 6.3

*Continue to collaborate with BLM, USFS, and NPS to identify opportunities for the Merced River Trail to align with and advance recreation, visitor use management, and forest health objectives in those jurisdictions*

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### OVERVIEW

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license for Merced Irrigation District’s (MID) Merced River Hydroelectric Project includes conditions to develop a plan to align the project’s existing Merced River Trail with a new trail segment that would follow the shoreline of Lake McClure and McSwain Reservoir. License conditions are in Appendix I, but significantly, the FERC plan includes conditions that MID:

“...shall, within 18 months of license issuance and in conjunction with BLM, develop and file with the Commission an agreed upon Conceptual Plan for the Merced River Trail from McSwain Dam to Bagby Recreation Area. The overall planning goal will be to align the Merced River Trail to follow the shoreline of Lake McClure and McSwain reservoirs where it is possible to do so. The Merced River Trail Conceptual Plan shall include the following: Table of Tables/Figures (Photos and maps), Executive Summary, Vision Statement, Purpose and Need, Setting, Discussion by Trail Alternative, Implementation-Merced ID’s Merced River Trail Conceptual Plan.”

Achieving this ambitious vision involves leadership from local and federal trail advocates, who are positioned to make recommendations to FERC, secure funding to implement the trail, and oversee it long-term. Historically and during the Vision Plan process, local trail advocates have expressed a desire for the trail to continue downstream from McSwain dam into Merced, perhaps to Lake Yosemite at the UC Merced campus.

### NEXT STEPS

Both the Mariposa County Planning Department (trail planning and implementation) and the Merced River Trail CWG (advocacy and monitoring of the licensing process) have significant roles to play in this action. Interestingly, the Rails to Trails Conservancy has expressed interest in helping the project partners facilitate a potential connection to UC Merced and elsewhere in the City and County of Merced, and could be a strategic collaborator.

### TIMELINE

Action is contingent upon FERC issuance of the License for the Merced River Hydroelectric Project. Once the License is issued, MID and BLM have 18 months to research and develop the Conceptual Plan and present it to FERC for inclusion in the MID operating license. Prior to that, the Merced River Trail project partners can begin mobilizing to find resources and build partnerships needed to collaboratively plan the trail below Bagby. Though a visionary and potentially transformative extension of the Merced River Trail, its important to note that the Vision Plan participants identified this action as less of a priority than other recommendations in this chapter.



**DOWNSTREAM RECREATION**  
The developed recreation amenities at Lake McSwain, which include fishing, boating, a Splash-n-Dash in the lake, and camping/glamping sites around the lake, provide a vastly different recreation experience than the more rugged, minimally improved conditions above the dam in the river canyon,

Lake McSwain Recreation Area (CA)



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### OVERVIEW

The Merced River Trail provides benefits beyond recreational use; namely the corridor can serve to bolster resilience of forest management through its dual use as a fire break, or by utilizing sections of already-existing fire break as connecting trail. Ensuring access to these routes as fire breaks can backstop existing but strained resources and bolster inter-agency response and mitigation efforts to wildland fire that protect communities and the regional economy.

The trail can also be used as an opportunity to educate users about environmental hazards occurrence and management by informing them of the dual utility of fire breaks, and other hazards exacerbated by climate change, such as major floods events and rockslides that in addition to large-scale tree mortality contribute to erosion throughout the Merced River canyon. Additionally, non-motorized routes can help reduce motorized use and overall emissions coming into Yosemite National Park. As such, the trail is vital for transitioning beyond carbon, and can help the Park and region reduce overall carbon emissions as part of broader County climate change mitigation objectives.

Further, ongoing, and close collaboration between advocates for the Merced River Trail and federal agency partners will help identify strategic opportunities for trail implementation and maintenance to support specific USFS and NPS objectives, resulting in additional resources needed to support implementation of this action.

### NEXT STEPS

The development of the Vision Plan has helped initiate a collaborative partnership between Mariposa County, Stanislaus National Forest, and Yosemite National Park on these topics. Next steps in expanding and further formalizing that partnership could involve adopting Memorandums of Understanding or other similar agreements between forest/park leadership and the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors that are specific to the trail, its role in achieving shared objectives, and its relationship to other existing regional agreements.

### TIMELINE

Growing and formalizing regional interagency partnerships through the trail project could begin immediately after the Vision Plan is adopted.



*Ackerson Meadow Restoration, Yosemite National Park/Stanislaus National Forest*



*Yellow Star Thistle Removal, Merced River in Yosemite National Park*



*Merced Grove Wildland Fire Fuel Treatment, Yosemite National Park*

#### **COORDINATED WATERSHED APPROACH**

Federal agencies in the Merced River corridor conduct a range of land management activities, including ecological monitoring and restoration, that the Merced River Trail could and should support.



# GOAL 7

*Initiate and support education and research activities that increase the community's connection to and knowledge about the natural ecosystem and cultural resources of the Wild and Scenic Merced River canyon*

## ACTION 7.1

*Install aesthetically appropriate public information elements that educate trail users about the river canyon's natural and cultural resources, and promote safe, responsible, and low-impact use of the trail*

## ACTION 7.2

*Maximize local volunteers in Merced River Trail projects, including trail maintenance, monitoring, and citizen science activities that contribute to other objectives in the Vision Plan*

## ACTION 7.3

*Support a program of community education and engagement activities, including guided field trips, presentations, and other events that build connections to the river and trail*

## ACTION 7.1 //

***Install aesthetically appropriate public information elements that educate trail users about the river canyon's natural and cultural resources, and promote safe, responsible, and low-impact use of the trail.***

### OVERVIEW

Public information elements are essential for equipping trail users with the information they need to safely and responsibly recreate. In addition to providing important wayfinding and directional information, they also serve to prepare trail users, especially inexperienced ones, for the potential risks and hazards of a natural environment, and equip them with the knowledge needed to use a landscape without degrading it. These outcomes are all critical in the Merced River canyon, and specifically align with the community's vision for the Merced River Trail.

However, in addition to these important trail management and administrative functions, public information elements like signs, brochures, and websites can facilitate deeper connections to the river canyon. By interpreting the landscape's human and non-human sense of place, these features can enrich users' experience of the Merced River Trail. Public information elements that compellingly engage with relevant themes such as Indigenous narratives, native plant and wildlife species, and modern industrial history can promote a sense of attachment to and stewardship for the canyon's resource among visitors.

Indeed, the design of the elements themselves can contribute to this larger placemaking/placekeeping approach, reflecting the themes of the interpretive content through judicious use of materials, form, and other factors. However, the opposite is also true—excessive, illegible, inconsistent, or aesthetically inappropriate public information elements can degrade the canyon and trail's visual character, and hamper the visitor's experience. Care and deliberation must be taken to ensure that public information elements add to, and certainly do not detract from, the experience of enjoying the trail.

### NEXT STEPS

The development of a signage and wayfinding master plan could be an impactful opportunity to articulate key issues and opportunities, and flesh out the details of the placement, design, and content of public information elements on the trail. Mariposa County could apply for funding, though it is critical to have support and collaboration from federal agency partners. In addition to having mandatory policies concerning these elements, including Sign and Poster Guidelines for the Forest Service • EM 7100-15, NPS-Sign System Specifications and UniGuide Standards, and BLM National Sign Handbook H-9130-1, agencies may have resources to support implementation of this action.

### TIMELINE

This is a medium-priority action. Once funded, the development of a signage and wayfinding master plan could take as little as 12 months.





Tonto National Forest (AZ)



East Point Park Bird Sanctuary (ON)



Williamette National Forest (OR)



Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Preserve (CA)

### SIGNAGE AS OPPORTUNITY

Interpretive, wayfinding, and warning/safety-related signage both provide important and enriching information for trail users, and can serve as appropriate opportunities to add to the river canyon and Merced River Trail's sense of place. Through both content, design, and materiality, signage can enhance the trail experience.



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### OVERVIEW

Vision Plan participants frequently identified citizen science as a compelling opportunity to combine the trail's potential to promote community stewardship for the river and canyon, and catalyze tangible environmental benefits for the landscape and watershed. Historically, there is significant precedent for these kinds of initiatives in the Merced River corridor, from the grassroots effort to secure Wild and Scenic designation in the 1970s to the Upper Merced River Watershed Council's long-running water quality monitoring project at Briceburg.

This recommended action leverages and builds upon this heritage, identifying additional volunteer-driven priorities along (and supported by) the trail. Among others, this includes invasive species removal (Action 4.1), mapping wildlife use patterns (Action 4.2), and contributing to trail building and maintenance activities (Action 4.3). The Vision Plan also identifies the need for an organization to spearhead and coordinate these and other volunteer activities (Action 8.1), both ensuring the long-term sustainability of volunteer programs and deepening their impact for the community and landscape.

### NEXT STEPS

Short-term, existing volunteer activities such as the Great Sierra River Cleanup should continue, perhaps with new and expanded partnerships that broaden the program's reach to organizations and communities that historically have not been engaged in the river or other environmental stewardship initiatives.

Long-term, it will require increased organizational capacity to coordinate and conduct the additional opportunities for volunteer engagement identified in the Action Plan. Additionally, coordination with the federal agencies is both beneficial, and in some cases, necessary for successful long-term implementation of this action. For example, by aligning citizen science initiatives with stated BLM, USFS, and NPS priorities, local engagement activities can efficiently contribute to ongoing federal efforts in the canyon. And in the case of trail maintenance/construction, this work will need to take place under a formal agreement with relevant agencies, such as a non-cost share agreement, and activities would need to be determined and noticed in compliance with existing agency policies and requirements. The potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1 is ideally suited to serve these functions, and implementing this action should be part of its mandate.

### TIMELINE

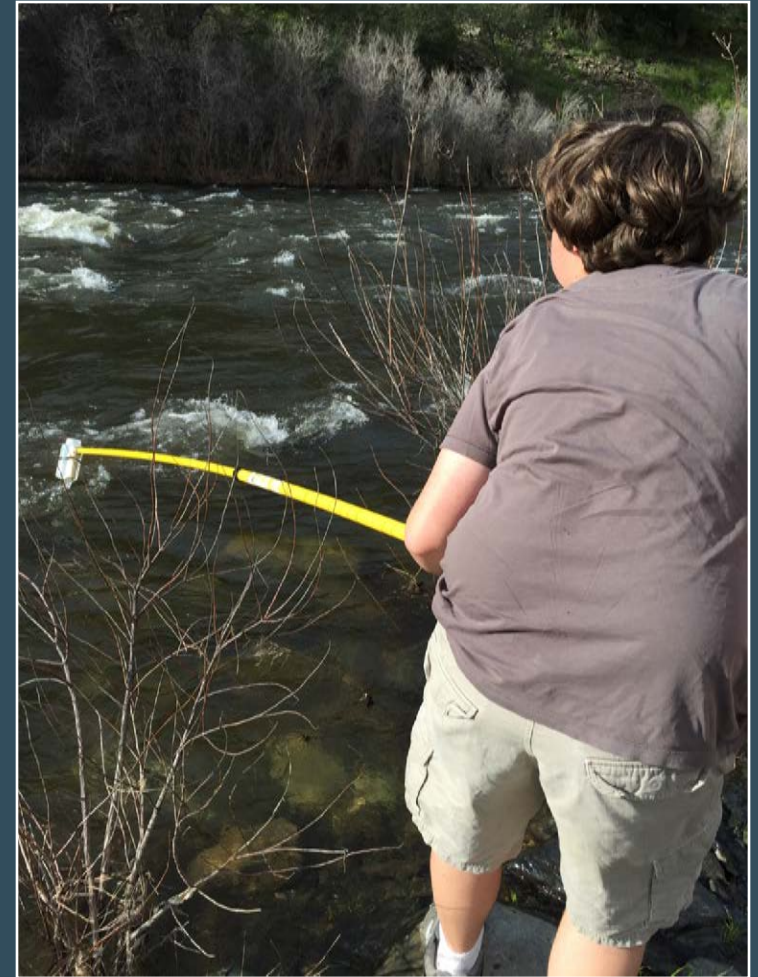
Short-term implementation is ongoing, while the timeline for long-term implementation will depend on the willingness and capacity of the coordinating organization.



Water quality testing (Briceburg, CA)



Great Sierra River Cleanup (Briceburg, CA)



Water sampling (Briceburg, CA)

#### CITIZEN SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP

Existing local organizations like the Upper Merced River Watershed Council (UMRWC) have a history of coordinating volunteer monitoring and conservation activities in the river canyon and along the existing Merced River Trail.



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### OVERVIEW

The Merced River watershed provides countless opportunities to engage with topics that have local, regional, and national importance, including human history, botany, and contemporary climate resiliency issues like catastrophic wildfire and flooding. The trail provides access to educational experiences where students of all ages can learn about these topics by experiencing them in the canyon—perhaps a more effective educational pathway than reading about them in a book or in a classroom. And in addition to place-based educational opportunities, these larger issues can also be explored in other ways outside of the river canyon, like through art in a gallery space, stories displayed in an interactive online map, public presentations, or even films (Action 3.1).

Regardless of the medium, the vision planning process underscored that Mariposans value community education and engagement on topics related to the Merced River watershed. Not only does a fuller awareness of the river equip Mariposans to serve as better stewards for its natural and cultural resources, but it also adds depth to local understanding of place.

Local trail advocates can continue to expand the delivery of education and engagement programs, including guided hikes, trail runs, and the development of trail- and river-specific curriculum that can be disseminated to educators throughout the county and elsewhere. Where appropriate, any onsite education programs can reference existing and future signage. These would be in addition to the significant educational benefits likely to stem from the boots-on-the-ground volunteer activities identified in Action 7.2.

### NEXT STEPS

Because this recommended action relies on the expertise and leadership of local organizations and agencies, an impactful next step would be to engage with those organizations to identify their specific interest areas, ideas for expanded programming, and needs or resource gaps in delivering their educational and engagement programs. Example organizations include education entities like NatureBridge and potential event organizers like the Upper Merced River Watershed Council and Yosemite Composite Mountain Bike Team. The Merced River Trail Community Working Group (CWG) could initially spearhead this effort. Once needs are identified, the CWG could help develop a more specific and targeted plan for supporting local organizations.

### TIMELINE

Initial outreach to help refine the CWG's role in supporting expanded engagement and education activities through the trail can get under way immediately upon plan adoption.





*Guided walks with Cal Poly SLO students (Merced River Recreation Management Area)*



*Wild and Scenic Film Festival, El Portal (CA)*

#### **OUTDOOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The existing Merced River Trail provides a compelling environment for hands-on outdoor learning, with opportunities for place-based curriculums in ecology, cultural history, and other topics important to local and regional audiences of all ages.



# GOAL 8

*Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities*

## ACTION 8.1

*Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the resources necessary for the trail's long-term success*

## ACTION 8.2

*Locate, design, and construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage to minimize maintenance needs*

## ACTION 8.3

*Develop a funding strategy to support construction, regular maintenance, and major repairs of the trail and its support facilities*

## ACTION 8.1 //

***Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the resources necessary for the trail's long-term success.***

### OVERVIEW

While some of the recommendations in this Action Plan can be implemented by existing organizations operating within their mandates and with resources already in hand, many actions are outside the scope and capacity of local project partners. Furthermore, all of the actions identified here, as well as other actions that will surely be recommended by future Vision Planning efforts, demand long-term funding, oversight, and stewardship of a dedicated organization for whom the Merced River Trail is a primary focus.

Technically, such an organization does not currently exist in Mariposa County, though there are several candidate organizations that could expand their mandate to serve this critical role for the community and watershed. This will require paid full-time staff whose responsibilities include implementing the Action Plan, including the monitoring tasks identified in Actions 3.4, 7.2, and many related tasks in Goal 4. This organization would also have an important role in facilitating and coordinating between Mariposa County, its residents, and federal agencies active in the Merced River canyon, and could serve as the primary point of contact for members of the public seeking information about the trail, river, and watershed. It would also serve as a central location for materials, including scientific research and reports, as identified in Action 3.1.

### NEXT STEPS

The visioning process identified the Upper Merced River Watershed Council (UMRWC) as a logical candidate to potentially serve this role, pending the availability of resources for staffing. Incidentally, the UMRWC is currently engaged in a capacity building and strategic planning effort funded through a grant from the Bureau of Reclamation, which perhaps could provide further detail and specificity to this recommendation. Conversely, a new organization could be formed whose explicit purpose is to serve as the Merced River (Trail) conservancy.

Regardless of the path forward, in order to be effective, any future conservancy will need support to get started with the personnel to both advance the recommendations in the Action Plan, and develop a self-sustaining organization. Funds could come from capacity building grants like the aforementioned BRM WaterSmart grant that the UMRWC successfully pursued, as well as from philanthropic support. Eventually, the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors may decide to allocate funding to this organization, as has been done with groups like the Mariposa County Arts Council, Yosemite/Mariposa County Tourism Bureau, and Mariposa County Firesafe Council.

### TIMELINE

This is one of the highest-priority recommendations in the Action Plan. However, the timing will depend on the availability of funding, and the capacity for local leadership to identify and empower an organization to pursue it.

#### DIVERSE RESPONSIBILITIES + OPPORTUNITIES

An organization responsible for the long-term management, oversight, and stewardship of the river and trail is critical to the success of the Merced River Trail Vision Plan. Nearly all of the recommended actions would greatly benefit from such an organization to catalyze, fund, and/or direct their implementation.

The table to the right depicts the envisioned conservancy's potential role in advancing each of the Vision Plan's recommended actions.

ACTION	POTENTIAL CONSERVANCY ROLE
1.1	If the route issue remains unresolved, this group could support this collaborative decision.
1.2	Minimal role
2.1	This group could help fund this study, though primary responsibility would likely lie with Mariposa County.
2.2	This group could drive implementation of this action, and ensuring general compliance with the MID settlement.
2.3	Identifying strategic sites and implementing restoration activities could be both be a tasks, especially the former.
2.4	This group would be the driving force in achieving this trail implementation milestone.
3.1	Developing and expanding this program would be a major task.
3.2	This group could pursue funding to support implementation of this action.
3.3	Rather than establishing principles, the focus would be on installing/maintaining the trail in accordance with them.
3.4	This would be a primary responsibility and function of this group.
3.5	This group's actions would be governed by the recommendations and spirit of this action.
4.1	Collaborating with universities and non-profits would be an opportunity, though not an obligation
4.2	This group could either lead this action, or support it through fundraising and volunteer organization.
4.3	This group would support this action through fundraising and volunteer coordination.
4.4	This group would be a key collaborator and local point of contact for BLM, USFS, and NPS partners.
4.5	This group could fund this study, and/or provide other resources for existing conditions monitoring.
4.6	This group could fund this study, and/or provide other resources for existing conditions monitoring.
5.1	This action, especially the publicizing aspects, would be a major responsibility of this group.
5.2	This would primarily be a Mariposa County action, which this group could support.
5.3	This group could help fund and be a central stakeholder in implementing this recommendation.
6.1	Minimal role
6.2	This group would likely have a minimal role, depending on their geographic area of emphasis.
6.3	This could be a major long-term focus of this group.
7.1	This group could raise funding to design, install, and maintain these elements.
7.2	This would be a primary responsibility of this group.
7.3	This would be a primary responsibility of this group.
8.1	-
8.2	This group could raise funding to design, install, and maintain these elements.
8.3	This would be a primary responsibility of this group.



# POTENTIAL CONSERVANCY PRINCIPLES

## 1 BE A NON-PROFIT

IN ORDER TO EFFECTIVELY FUNDRAISE, IT IS ALMOST ESSENTIAL FOR THE ORGANIZATION TO BE A 501(C)(3) NON-PROFIT. THOUGH THIS DESIGNATION WOULD LIMIT THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY'S ABILITY TO LOBBY, IT WOULD PROVIDE TAX-EXEMPT STATUS AND REQUIRE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A BOARD OF DIRECTORS TO ENSURE THE ORGANIZATION STAYS FOCUSED ON ITS PURPOSE.

## 2 BE AUTHORIZED

GIVEN THE CLOSE PARTNERSHIP THAT MUST EXIST BETWEEN THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY AND THE FEDERAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION OVER THE TRAIL, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY ORGANIZATION BE RECOGNIZED AND AUTHORIZED, LIKELY THROUGH A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING/ AGREEMENT OR NON-COST SHARE AGREEMENT, TO WORK ON TRAIL ISSUES

## 3 BE INDEPENDENT

WHILE THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY WILL BE A CLOSE COLLABORATOR AND STAKEHOLDER FOR THE FEDERAL AGENCIES THAT MANAGE THE LAND IN THE RIVER CANYON, THEY MUST ALSO BE IN A POSITION TO ENSURE THAT THOSE AGENCIES COMPLY WITH THEIR STATUTORY AND LEGAL OBLIGATIONS, ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO TRAIL ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE.

## 4 BE FULLY STAFFED

THOUGH THE ORGANIZATION WILL BE CHARGED WITH ASSEMBLING AND DEPLOYING COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS FOR A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES, CAPABLE, QUALIFIED EMPLOYEES ARE NECESSARY FOR THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL VISION PLAN. NECESSARY POSITIONS INCLUDE AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, A FINANCIAL MANAGER, AND A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DIRECTOR.

## 5 BE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY

THE PLANNING EFFORT REVEALED A SHARED COMMUNITY VISION FOR THE MERCED RIVER TRAIL AS MORE THAN JUST A RECREATIONAL AMENITY—IT IS A CATALYST FOR EDUCATION, STEWARDSHIP, AND CONNECTIONS TO THE WATERSHED, AND AN ARENA FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION. THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO PURSUE ALL OF THE FACETS OF THIS VISION.

## 6 BE ACCOUNTABLE

THE ENVISIONED CONSERVANCY WOULD BE ACCOUNTABLE TO ITS BOARD MEMBERS, BUT ALSO MUST BE ACCOUNTABLE TO AREA STAKEHOLDERS. FOR THIS REASON, IT IS CRITICAL THAT THE ORGANIZATION BE BASED IN MARIPOSA COUNTY, COMPRISED PRIMARILY (IF NOT EXCLUSIVELY) OF MARIPOSA COUNTY RESIDENTS, AND MAINTAIN A STRONG PRESENCE IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

### KEY ORGANIZATIONAL TENETS

The Vision Plan provides a roadmap for the future conservancy to follow in implementing a community-supported vision for the Merced River Trail. Ultimately, that organization will have the authority to set its course, but the planning effort has identified six key tenets to help guide the group's formation.



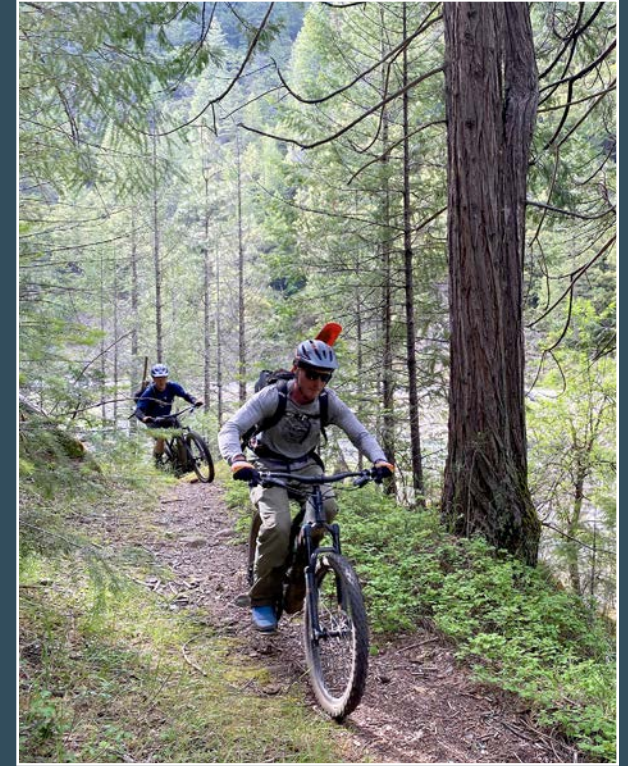
Mammoth Lakes Trail System includes more than 300 miles of trails improved and stewarded by a partnership between the Town of Mammoth Lakes, California, Inyo National Forest, and the nonprofit Mammoth Lakes Recreation.

The long-term vision is supported by a collaborative master plan and interagency governance. A local special tax initiative helps fund the trail work. Mammoth Lakes is also working to integrate trail and open space planning into wildfire risk reduction efforts.



Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship is a nonprofit organization that builds and maintains trails around the Sierra Buttes, Tahoe, Plumas, and Lassen National Forests of California.

Trail work is accomplished through professional trail builders, coordinated volunteers, and contracts with the U.S. Forest Service. Businesses and residents support work through volunteer work events and programs like Adopt-a-Trail and \$1 for Trails. Community events bring families and user groups together.



Whitefish Legacy Partners is a nonprofit organization that helps expand, develop, manage, and maintain a network of trails around the Glacier National Park gateway community of Whitefish, Montana.

They acquire land and easements to expand access. Trails are designed, constructed, and maintained with professional and volunteer crews. The organization also leads educational programming for youth and adults.

#### REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PRECEDENT

Public lands, trails, and trails systems throughout the Sierra and elsewhere in the US are supported by a range of high-capacity non-profits whose models, successes, and lessons learned can be enormously instructive in developing and operating a future Merced River Trail conservancy and advocacy organization.



# GOAL 8

*Ensure adequate resources for the long-term maintenance and repair of the Merced River Trail and its necessary facilities*

## ACTION 8.1

*Support the establishment of an organization to serve as a Merced River Trail conservancy which can acquire, allocate, and manage the resources necessary for the trail's long-term success*

## ACTION 8.2

*Locate, design, and construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage to minimize maintenance needs*

## ACTION 8.3

*Develop a funding strategy to support construction, regular maintenance, and major repairs of the trail and its support facilities*

## ACTION 8.2 //

***Locate, design, and construct trail support elements such as bathrooms, trash cans, and signage to minimize maintenance needs.***

### OVERVIEW

Established and clearly marked trails help to funnel overall use and reduce collective impacts. For instance, trailheads and connections between trail classes (e.g., from shared gravel road to single track) need to be identified in the context of a larger trail network of bathrooms, trash cans, and signage. Reference maps and linked signage showing the trail network can help users to pre-plan, coordinate with others, and adjust their activities across a broad array of decisions from safety considerations to personal activity preferences and changing weather conditions.

To both limit the trail's impact on the landscape and ensure that trail elements are in working order with minimal maintenance, amenities such as bathrooms, trash cans and signage should be concentrated at hubs of high visitor use where impacts can be disproportionately greater. The 2022 UC Merced trail use and vehicle count study is valuable for determining use levels to inform trail support. Hub locations shall be determined based on use levels, with the highest use areas receiving needed infrastructural improvements to minimize maintenance needs and support access at a capacity commensurate with use levels and seasonal visitor's needs across the recreational spectrum.

At these locations, it is critical that trail support elements are designed and constructed to be durable, and aligned with the rugged, intentional aesthetic that the community has strongly endorsed (and which is reflected in Actions 3.3 and 7.1). This would entail emphasizing natural materials, especially stone, and avoiding prefabricated, off-the-shelf furnishings. It should be noted that co-locating features at front country hubs can help to limit the amount of support elements throughout the Wild and Scenic segments of the trail, limiting the visual impact of these elements throughout the trail corridor. Trail support elements that involve new structures and maintenance obligations in the less accessible, far-flung areas of the trail corridor should be avoided, and the trail experience should remain primitive in these locations.

### NEXT STEPS

Expanding and detailing this action could be part of the trail design guidelines described in Action 3.3, and combined into the scope for a future planning project that could be managed by the Planning Department and Merced River Trail CWG. Additional items in that larger planning project could include Actions 2.1, 4.2, and 5.3.

### TIMELINE

The 2022 trail use and vehicle count study will be completed in January 2023, at which point the trail hub planning and design work can begin in earnest.

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### OVERVIEW

Since the existing segments of the Merced River Trail are within BLM jurisdiction, that federal agency has historically been solely responsible for supporting trail building and maintenance activities. In recent years, Mariposa County has been able to assist BLM staff to identify and secure external funding to augment this work, but the vision planning effort indicated that focused and dedicated work is needed to both sustainably execute these activities, and to coordinate them across federal agencies and throughout the river canyon,

The potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1 would be perfectly suited to carry out this action, which is likely to entail a combination of traditional non-profit development activities (like grant writing and philanthropy) and other funding mechanisms as appropriate. Complementary income could come from programmatic revenue, like tickets to special events and Merced River Trail merchandise, or allocations from federal and local agencies who benefit from a future conservancy's stewardship of the trail and river canyon.

The Mariposa County Recreation and Resiliency Plan identifies several particularly potent opportunities for the future conservancy to consider. In particular, the plan recommends raising the county's transient occupancy tax (TOT) to align more closely with other communities in the region, and allocating the incremental increase to recreation and resiliency initiatives. If the TOT is increased, the future conservancy could potentially secure some of these recreation and resiliency funds. This conservancy could also work to enshrine the seasonal trail worker positions mentioned in Action 3.3.

### NEXT STEPS

Since this action is primarily the purview of the potential conservancy organization identified in Action 8.1, it is crucial for that organization to be established before fully implementing Action 8.3. However, with sufficient public support, implementation of the TOT adjustment that is called for in the Recreation and Resiliency Plan could be an appropriate next step. For approval, this issue would need to be put before voters in the form of a ballot initiative, which can be accomplished through action of the Board of Supervisors (requiring a supermajority to pass) or by citizens initiative (requiring a simple majority).

### TIMELINE

While the timeline for fully implementing this action depends on implementation of Action 8.1, progress on the TOT-related ballot measure could move forward within the year.





# MERCED RIVER TRAIL

VISION PLAN //

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