



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

FOREST SERVICE  
PACIFIC  
SOUTHWEST  
REGION



PROPERTY OF  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE DEPT.  
GENERAL NATIONAL FOREST



MERCED  
RIVER



SOUTH FORK  
MERCED  
RIVER



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**RECORD OF DECISION**

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**ROD NOV 1991**

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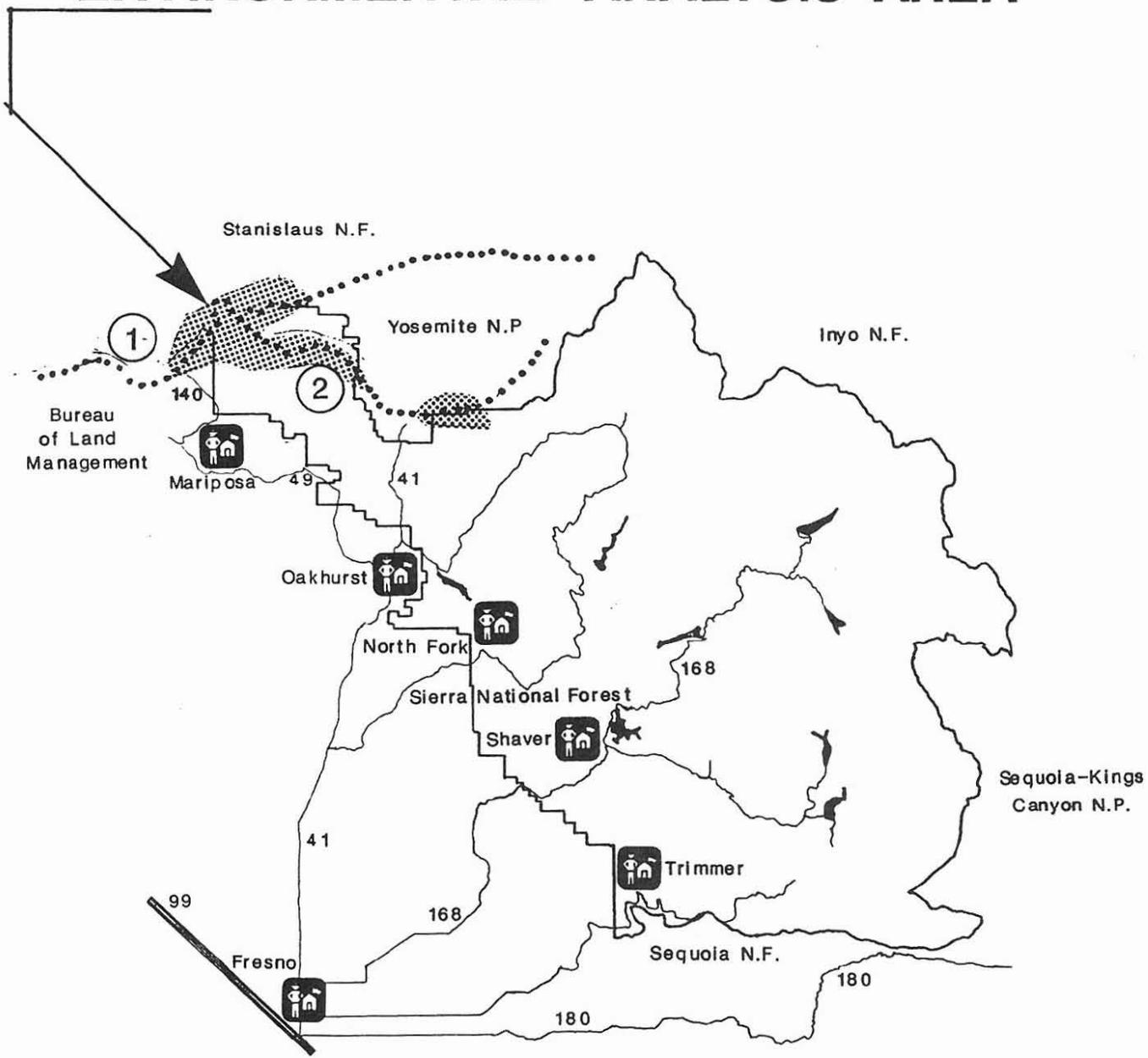
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**South Fork and Merced Wild and Scenic  
Rivers**

# PROJECT AREA



# PROJECT ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AREA



## Legend

- ① Merced River
- ② South Fork Merced River

## RECORD OF DECISION

Merced and South Fork Merced Wild and Scenic Rivers

## MARIPOSA AND MADERA COUNTIES

### USDA FOREST SERVICE

Sierra National Forest, Mariposa Ranger District  
Stanislaus National Forest, Groveland Ranger District

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Record of Decision (ROD) is to inform the public of my decision for management of the Wild and Scenic River (W&SR) corridors for the Merced and South Fork Merced Rivers. It also documents the reasons for the decision. The preferred Alternative C was chosen based on the analysis documented in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Alternative C is the basis for the Implementation Plan (PLAN).

Located in Mariposa and Madera Counties are the Merced and South Fork Merced Rivers. Portions of these rivers are designated Wild and Scenic Rivers. They were established by Public Law 100-149 in November 1987. The Act indicated that the rivers are to have a completed Management Plan within three years of the signing of the Act. A completed Management Plan (Forest Service refers to this as an Implementation Plan, or Plan) accompanies this ROD. A FEIS also accompanies this ROD. A Boundary and Classification Environmental Assessment (EA) companion document has been prepared for this project.

The Plan for the Merced and South Fork Merced Rivers, required by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Public Law 90-542, as amended, is based on an alternative in the FEIS. The PLAN provides management guidelines for a total of 33 miles of W&SR corridor. These are managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM was a joint preparer of the Plan and FEIS. An additional 3 miles are jointly managed by the Forest Service and the National Park Service.

The public played an integral part in the analysis and in developing alternative management strategies for these rivers. Public and agency comments were solicited throughout the planning process. Several mediums were used. For example, regular meetings with interested individuals, public meetings, press releases, and W&SR updated mailers were used to communicate with the public at various stages in the planning process. Public comments were recorded at the public meetings and received through letters.

On July 31, 1990 an announcement was published in the Federal Register indicating the Draft EIS (DEIS) and Plan were available for public review. As a result of public and agency reviews of these drafts, revised and edited versions of the original alternatives were established. No new analyses were undertaken; however, editorial corrections and points of clarification have been added to the FEIS alternatives and the Plans' preferred alternative.

The proposed action is to implement the Moderate Use Alternative C, in which a series of management zones would be created. Management direction will vary by zone and will range from managing for river-based recreation within the Recreational zone on the Merced River, to leaving areas essentially un-modified within the Scenic and Wild zones along the South Fork of the Merced River.

## 2.0 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was an integral part of the development of the DEIS and Plan. The issues were the basis for the development of the alternatives, the objectives, and the management direction.

A Public Participation Plan was written in March 1988. This plan identified opportunities for public involvement. The first opportunity was during the identification of issues at the public meetings when concept alternatives were presented; the second, was during the written comment period during the draft planning stages, the third was after the release of the agency preferred alternative and publication of the DEIS and PLAN when the public had another opportunity to provide written comments to the Draft plans.

The public involvement process took place from September 1988 to November 1990 and consisted of the following steps:

1. September 5, 1989, a press release announcing a public meeting was sent to all local papers.

2. September 5, 1989, flyers announcing a public meeting were sent to 1,450 people and agencies. This list came from an updated mailing list of the Stanislaus N.F., the Sierra N.F. and the BLM.

3. September 19, 1989, public meeting held in Mariposa, California with 75 people attending. Concept Alternatives were presented. No preferred alternative was recommended. Public comments were recorded.

4. November 10, 1989, flyers sent to approximately 350 people who expressed a desire to be informed of the planning process.

5. December 10, 1989, flyers sent to another 200 people who expressed a desire to be informed of the planning process.

6. Jan-Sept 1989 information meetings held as requested with individuals, mining groups, Sierra Club groups, Friends of the River, Mariposa Board of Supervisors, and owners of property within the W&SR.

7. July 31, 1990, the Federal Register published announcement of DEIS/Plan.

8. August 01, 1990, flyers sent to approximately 750 people, who by returned mailings or attendance at the public meeting indicated they wished to be involved in the planning process.

9. August 28, 1990, letter with copies of the DEIS/Plan sent to all people who requested a copy. A preferred alternative was recommended. Approximately 400 public comments that were previously recorded from meetings and letters were published along with agency answers in the DEIS.

10. September 21, 1990, the due date was amended in a September 28 Federal Register announcement and amended to November 30, 1990 when all public comments concerning the DEIS/Plan must be received.

11. October 16, 1990, flyer #5 sent to approximately 750 people on current mailing list announcing that the next public meeting will be held November 5, 1990 in Mariposa California.

12. October 24, 1990, a press release announcement was sent to the Fresno Bee and other local Mariposa papers indicating an information meeting will be held November 5, 1990.

13. February 1991, flyer #6 sent to 1,017 people who made comments to the DEIS/Plan. The flyer indicated that the FEIS/Plan was scheduled to be published by April 1991 and to expect a ROD.

Approximately 400 public concerns were recorded as a result of the first 1989 public meeting and letters. The Forest Service and BLM answer resolutions were also recorded. These concerns and agency resolutions were published in the DEIS/Plan. These concerns are documented in Appendix B of the FEIS labeled "External Public Comments."

Approximately 180 public concerns with 1,017 letters were recorded. This was the result of the DEIS/Plan publishing and mailing to all those requesting copies. The recorded public concerns to the DEIS/Plan with agency resolutions answers are documented in Appendix G of the FEIS and labeled "Draft EIS/Plan written comments."

## 3.0 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternatives were developed following public and agency scoping. The internal scoping agency meetings are documented in Appendix C of the FEIS. The external scoping public meetings are documented in Appendix B of the FEIS. Issues and concerns were determined within the parameters of PL 100-149 and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. In 94% of the Merced and South Fork Merced River area, public scoping indicated that the area should be kept as natural and unregulated as is possible. In 6% (or 2 miles) of the Hite Cove area on the South Fork Merced River there was only moderate consensus. There were conservation user groups wanting to keep the area natural and eliminate existing OHV use on the South side of Hite Cove. There were OHV user groups wanting the area to provide cross country OHV use on both the south and north side of the South Fork Hite Cove area. The alternatives were created by grouping comments according to emphasis resulting in four themes. 1. The first theme was continuing the current management direction (Alternative A, Present Use) 2. The second theme was emphasizing preservation of natural resources Alternative B, Limited Use). 3. Theme three divided the area into zones with different management strategies, Alternative C, Moderate Use). 4. Theme four emphasized river-based recreation, Alternative D, Maximum Use).

Following publication of the DEIS, the public expressed overall support of Alternative C within the Merced River's "Recreational" and the South Fork River's "Wild" river segments (94% of the 33 miles being studied). There was also general support for Alternative C within the "Scenic" river segment (the remaining 2 miles of the 33 miles being studied). However, there were conditions for this support within the "Scenic" segment. The conservation groups wanted assurances that the OHV groups would mitigate or not create any environmental impacts to the existing south side route access to Hite Cove and that the public agencies would monitor this use. The OHV groups would favor Al-

ternative C around the Hite Cove area if there could be assurances that the north side access system would not be closed to future Forest wide OHV route studies. Alternative C does allow the existing OHV access on the South Side, but does not recommend opening up the north side within the 1/4 mile wide wild and scenic river boundary to OHV access. Alternative C does not close or make decisions on the existing uses outside the Wild and Scenic 1/4 mile boundary on the existing south side Jerseydale route or the existing north side administrative route around Hite Cove. The Plan's "monitoring plan" indicates what assurances or controls the agency will use for the OHV use on the south side of Hite Cove. This EIS/Plan closes a north side 1/4 mile section within the Wild and Scenic corridor to OHV use around the Hite Cove area.

In summary the alternatives are:

**Alternative A (Present Use)** Current emphasis is to provide limited recreation facilities and opportunities for dispersed recreation. Only those improvements and policies covered by approved plans, EA's or completed Forest Plans will be implemented. This alternative will continue the existing mix of uses. Use will increase as a function of population growth. Associated wear on cultural resources and riparian vegetation could increase to unacceptable levels. There will be no major developments within the W&SR corridors. Commercial rafting capacity along the Merced will not change significantly. Increased overnight use will occur in undeveloped dispersed campsites along with the Merced and South Fork Merced canyons creating potential fire resource problems. None of the existing developed sites would be rehabilitated. Minimal visitor information services would be provided to the public. Vegetation and cultural resources sites would be at risk from unregulated use.

**Alternative B (Limited Use)** Emphasis is placed on providing limited recreation facilities while maximizing the primitive and semi-primitive non-motorized experience within the "Wild" classified areas and the rural experience levels within the "Recreational" classifications. This alternative would manage for maximum retention of wild, rugged character and biological diversity of the area. This alternative would have the least effect on the natural environment. There would be no major development within the W&SR. Commercial rafting capacity would remain essentially at the current level. The multi-agency Merced River Trail would be allowed to be built.

**Alternative C (Moderate Use)** This alternative would vary management emphasis by zone. Four zones would be established. The opportunity class would range from essentially unmodified to developed recreation. Objectives for each zone would be based on unique features, suitability and ability to withstand use. Emphasis is placed on providing moderate recreation improvements within the river corridor while protecting the existing qualities of each river segment. The segments classified as "Recreational" on the Merced will maintain the existing rural experiences within the river corridor. The South Fork Merced River zones will emphasize non-motorized use within the "Wild" segments and both motorized and non-motorized use within the "Scenic" seg-

ment. Vegetation and cultural resources would be protected or adverse effects would be mitigated. Commercial rafting capacity would approximate current levels. The only major developments within the W&SR would be the construction of partially developed campsites in lieu of dispersed sites on the Incline Road and the installation of one pedestrian bridge at Hite Cove and one pedestrian/equestrian bridge at Devils Gulch on the South Fork Merced River. The potential multi-agency Merced River Trail would be allowed to be built.

**Alternative D (Maximum Use)** This alternative would emphasize increased recreation opportunities. Facilities would be added or expanded to increase capacity. Development would be consistent with resource values and W&SR designations. Emphasis would be placed on providing a developed recreation experience and allowing for motorized use and access within the river corridors' Recreational and Scenic classifications. The areas classified as Recreational on the Merced would maintain the rural experience levels. Vegetation and cultural resources would be protected or adverse effects would be mitigated. Interpretation would be emphasized. Commercial rafting capacity would be the highest of any alternative. The significant developments would include the potential addition of a railroad on the Incline road, the potential addition of OHV use on the north side of the Hite Cove area within the W&SR corridor, fully developed campsites along Incline road, a moderate level of historical and interpretive buildings around the Hite Cove area. The multi-agency Merced River Trail would be allowed to be built.

#### 4.0 RESOLUTION OF THE ISSUES

This section briefly describes the issues addressed and the resolution of these issues by the Alternatives considered. Issues were addressed through the design of specific alternatives. Chapter 2.0 of the FEIS describes measures common to all alternatives. Actions specific to Alternative C were further developed and described in the accompanying Implementation Plan.

##### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES:

*What actions will be necessary, if portions of the plan are implemented, to meet the criteria of the cultural resources following section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act?*

##### RESOLUTION:

To date, there have been documented systematic inventories of the archaeological resources within the W&SR as reported in the EIS. A number of historic, prehistoric, and ethnohistoric sites are known to exist. More high density sites of all types are expected based on existing sampling along the Merced. A dense concentration of sites occurs on the Hite Cove area on the South Fork Merced River and in the El Portal area on the Merced River. There are members of the Southern Sierra Miwok tribe that consider these selected sites significant. They are concerned that these sites remain accessible to them and protected from damage.

Protection of cultural resources is an issue in developing the river plans around the El Portal and Hite Cove areas.

The outstanding river features of the W&SR have attracted people since prehistoric times. Popular locations and features however frequently are also prehistoric, historic, and or ethnohistoric sites. This convergence of current use and archaeological sites is intensified in the narrow floor of the Merced and the South Fork canyons.

The FEIS and Plan require that archaeological reconnaissance and Native American consultation take place prior to any project activity. There is a potential for adverse effects to occur under all alternatives. The level of mitigation versus protection changes by alternative. No adverse effects will occur if mitigation procedures are implemented.

Alternative B would offer maximum protection. Alternative C would offer a high level of protection. The future value of sites would be preserved. Under Alternative A, the risk of use-caused damage would continue or increase. Under Alternative D, sites in recreation and scenic zones would have to be mitigated before any actions could be implemented. A few mitigation techniques limit a site's value to the present level of technology. Sites in Recreation and Scenic zones would be protected. Their future value would be preserved.

#### FIRE:

*What measures are needed to keep fire potential at acceptable levels in the river canyon? Do the two National Forests and the BLM have a coordinated fire plan or policy within the W&SR corridor? What fire suppression strategies are important?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Sierra and Stanislaus National Forest policy for the suppression of wildfire in general forested areas is to complete one of the three pre-determined suppression strategies: Confine, Contain and Control. The suppression strategy in the Merced River canyon would be controlled with an acreage objective of 10 acres. Because of steep terrain, the use of heavy equipment is limited in the canyon bottom within the W&SR corridor. Fire Management will be conducted by the Sierra in accordance with a Local Operating Plan agreed to by the Sierra and Stanislaus Forests.

The BLM's fire policy is to suppress wildfire. Because of steep terrain, the use of heavy equipment is limited. The BLM has a Burn Plan which includes lands located along the BLM's 4 mile portion of the Merced Wild and scenic River.

The fire management policies within the Merced Canyon's W&SR corridor on lands administered by the Yosemite National Park are outside the scope of this FEIS.

#### FISHERIES:

*What types of fisheries management policies will be included in this Implementation Plan?*

#### RESOLUTION:

The South Fork Merced River is inhabited by self-sustaining populations of rainbow trout, brook trout and brown trout. The South Fork Merced River section in the Sierra National Forest is one of 21 state designated Wild Trout Streams. There are also rainbow trout, and small mouth bass which are self-sustaining along the Merced River. All Alternatives provide for the protection of fish habitat, but with variation in the level of emphasis and development.

Under Alternative B, fisheries would be emphasized and maintained at current levels, but not marketed. Fishing use would increase in proportion to population growth. In Alternative A, fisheries would not be emphasized or opportunities promoted but may be maintained at current levels. Fishing use would continue in proportion to population growth. Under Alternative D, recreational fishing would be emphasized but stocking would have to be supplemented to maintain current levels within the Recreation and Scenic zones. Fishing opportunities would be promoted and publicized. Fishing use would increase as a function of this promotion. Under Alternative C, fisheries would be emphasized and maintained at current levels, but not promoted or publicized. Fishing use growth would be a function of population growth.

#### WILDLIFE:

*What will the effects be on wildlife from recreation activities, motorized uses, mining, and fuels management?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Much of the corridor areas of the Merced and South Fork Merced Rivers are essentially unmodified and both support a rich diversity of plant and animal life. All Alternatives provide for the protection of wildlife habitat with variation in the level of emphasis and development.

Alternative B would be consistent with the recognized river attributes, wildlife habitat would be given priority over other uses. Federally listed Threatened and Endangered species will be provided the highest level of protection. Corridor area would be available for cooperative studies. The number, timing and type of visitor use could be restricted if monitoring indicated it was necessary to protect wildlife. In Alternative A, the management of wildlife habitat would continue at the present level. Threatened and Endangered species habitat and deer winter habitat within designated corridors are considered to be in good condition. Existing wildlife use areas would be maintained. In Alternative D, the management of people and habitats would be equally emphasized. Sensitive areas would be protected. Habitat enhancement would be done where compatible with recreational use and visual objectives. In Alternative C, natural zones would be designated according to the site-specific value for wildlife. Effects on wildlife habitat are similar to Alternative B. A few selected areas would be designated potential wildlife viewing and educational areas. Sensitive and superior sites would be protected by designating zones. Measures would be taken to prevent behavior modification in wildlife. Recreational shooting would not be permitted in designated areas along the Merced and along the South Fork Merced Hite Cove area.

#### GEOLOGY AND SOIL:

*Will implementing any recreation development or activity have any effect on erosion or the geologic integrity of the area?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Limited geologic hazards exist as a result of wasting from unstable slopes passing through or being deposited in the river canyons. This risk has been addressed by minimizing or eliminating development in high-risk zones in all Alternatives.

Under Alternative B, change to the existing geology and soils will be minimal within all zones. Activities allowed

under this Alternative which could affect the soils resource include prescribed burning, pedestrian and equestrian use. Under Alternative A, change to the existing geology and soils will be moderate within the Recreation zone because of limited controls. There would be potential for geologic hazards, loss of productivity and erosion around the existing foot trails and OHV routes if mitigating measures were not planned. In Alternative D, change to the existing geology and soils will be moderate to heavy within all zones. Activities allowed under this Alternative will include those listed in Alternatives B and C plus motorized OHV route access on the north side of Hite Cove and a train access system along the Incline Road. Substantial mitigating measures will have to be established to control the impacts to soils along these access systems. Under Alternative C, change to the existing geology and soils will be moderate within the Recreation zones and minimal within the Scenic and Wild zones. Mitigating measures would have to be established to control the impacts to soils along the access systems.

#### RECREATION:

*What types and amounts of recreation use are appropriate within the designated corridors, or on specific segments? How can recreation use best be monitored and controlled, and regulations enforced? Should bridges or fords be constructed across rivers for recreation access reasons?*

#### RESOLUTION:

The levels of recreational development vary by alternative. The main types of recreation activities are camping, hiking, equestrian use, rafting, OHV use, fishing, picnicking, and driving for pleasure.

Further analysis on OHV use is currently being conducted by the Sierra National Forest. A Forest-wide EIS is being developed which analyzes alternatives for OHV use and access. A DEIS is projected to be available in October of 1992, with a FEIS anticipated in early 1993. The analysis area includes portions of the W&SR corridors of the Merced and the South Fork Merced Rivers and may or may not result in a revised management strategy for these areas.

**Camping:** In Alternative B, only the existing dispersed camping would be allowed along the north side's Incline road along the Merced River. There would be no change to the existing developed sites along the south side of the Merced. Under Alternative A, dispersed camping may increase on the north side of the Incline Road because of lack of management controls. Under Alternative D, high density developed camping sites would be constructed on the north side of the Incline road's Merced River. There would be no dispersed sites. In Alternative C, moderate density walk-in and drive-in developed sites would be developed within the Recreation zone to control the potential fire danger.

**Trails, Rafting and OHV Use:** In Alternative B, recreation capacity may remain at current levels of use. Rafting will continue on the Merced River. There will be effects in the put-in and take-out areas on BLM and Forest Service administered lands because the sites will have to be upgraded. No trail construction or bridges are planned. Under Alternative A, recreation use capacity remains at current levels. Public motorized OHV access will continue on the south side route to Hite Cove. All existing trails following the South Fork Merced River will be maintained. Public and commer-

cial rafting will continue unchanged at current use levels on the Merced River with no effects. No mitigation of effects will be planned. In Alternative D, recreation capacity will significantly increase from the current levels of use. Commercial rafting will increase. Portions of the Incline Road will be converted to either a train or foot/horse/mountain bike system. Public motorized OHV access will be allowed on both the south and north Hite Cove routes. A vehicle ford or bridge will be constructed at Hite Cove and one pedestrian-horse bridge will be constructed at Devils Gulch on the South Fork Merced Trail system. Under Alternative C, the recreation capacity will moderately increase from the current levels of use. Commercial rafting will be maintained at current levels. Moderate trail construction of the Incline Road trail to either a foot/horse/mountain bike trail system may be implemented. Public motorized OHV access will be allowed on the existing south side Hite Cove route within the W&SR corridor. One pedestrian bridge will be constructed at Hite Cove and one pedestrian/equestrian bridge will be constructed at Devils Gulch on the South Fork Merced Trail system. Upgrading of the put-in and take-out rafting sites will be implemented along the Merced River.

#### GRAZING:

*How should livestock grazing be managed within the designated river corridor?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Management recommendations for the range resource vary by alternative.

In Alternative B, there may be minimal effects to the cattle grazing activities with more public use of the Merced W&SR. Site specific revised grazing allotment plans that follow the NEPA process may be modified to avoid river corridors, riparian areas and cultural resources sites. The AUM's would not change. Under Alternative A, there may be moderate effects to the cattle grazing activities. There would be no modification of grazing allotment plans. AUM's would not change. Emphasis would be on forage utilization consistent with the existing forest management directions for resource protection. In Alternative D, there may be moderate effects to cattle grazing activities with maximum public use. Grazing allotments plans would be modified to avoid recreation areas and cultural resource sites. The established grazing season would be modified to change the off-date to insure that cattle are out of the area by Memorial Day weekend. In Alternative C, there may be minimal effects to the cattle grazing activities. Grazing allotment plans would be modified to avoid public use seasons and sensitive riparian areas. Emphasis would be on forage utilization.

#### LAND OWNERSHIP AND USE:

*How will any recreation improvements planned by the agencies affect the private land owners within the corridor? How will the scenic easements effect the private landowners?*

#### RESOLUTION:

There are approximately 3 miles along the 33 miles of designated W&SR along the Merced and South Fork Merced River that are privately owned.

Under Alternative B, existing impacts to private lands may continue at moderate levels. Effects include fire hazards, noise, trespass, litter, vandalism to private improvements, sanitation problems, liability problems, hunting

restrictions, motorized access problems, and damage to private property caused by people using private lands along the Merced and South Fork. Scenic easements are presently not necessary along the Hite Cove hiking trail because of existing private land partnerships. In Alternative A, existing impacts to private lands may continue at moderate levels. The effects may be increased from Alternative B because of the lack of public controls. Scenic easements are presently not necessary. Under Alternative D, existing impacts to private lands will continue at maximum levels because of the anticipated Merced River Trail and/or possible train system that is proposed along the Incline Road in the Merced Canyon. Scenic easements would be required along the trail access system to protect the private owners from liability. In Alternative B and C, existing impacts to private lands will continue at moderate levels. The effects may increase because of constructing the proposed hiking, horse and mountain bike Merced Trail proposal along the Incline Road in the Merced Canyon. Scenic easements may be required.

#### LAND USE:

*Will the concern of motorized or non-motorized use on specific trails/ roads be resolved through this Plan?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Decisions regarding OHV management within the W&SR corridor (a quarter of mile on each side of the river or approximately a 1/2 mile wide) will be made with this FEIS/Plan and ROD. The OHV closure on the north side of the river at Hite Cove will be included in the analysis of the Forest OHV Plan. The alternatives considered different Recreation Opportunity Spectrum classes for motorized or non-motorized use within the river corridor. Decisions concerning the strategy of OHV management on public lands outside the W&SR corridor will not be made with this ROD. This issue will be dealt with through another environmental analysis and decision document.

Alternative B proposes no public motorized (OHV) access on the south or north side existing routes to Hite Cove within the W&SR corridor. The segment classified "Scenic" on the South Fork Merced River will be managed as semi-primitive non-motorized (SPNM) within the W&SR corridor. Under Alternative A, the existing public motorized (OHV) access on the south side would continue within the corridor to Hite Cove. The north side would continue to be closed to public motorized access. The area would continue to be managed as a semi-primitive motorized (SPM) zone in accordance with present forest management guidelines. Alternative D proposes OHV public motorized access be allowed on both the south and north sides of the Hite Cove route. The area would continue to be managed as a semi-primitive motorized zone. Alternative C would be similar to Alternative A. The existing public motorized (OHV) access on the south side would continue within the W&SR corridor to Hite Cove. The north side would continue to be closed within the corridor to public motorized access. The area would be managed as a semi-primitive motorized 1/4 mile wide zone on the south side of the river at Hite Cove, and managed as a semi-primitive non-motorized 1/4 mile wide zone on the north side of the river at Hite Cove.

#### MINERALS:

*What kinds of mining activities are appropriate within the river corridor? Should this type of activity be excluded outside of Wild segments? Should there be seasons for recreational mining?*

#### RESOLUTION

There are valid mining claims in the W&SR corridors. The management of mining claims was treated the same for all Alternatives. All existing valid mining operations may continue subject to the conditions and regulations (36 CFR 228). Mineral activities will be conducted in a manner that minimizes surface disturbance, sedimentation, pollution and visual impairment. No additional access or development is currently planned. Authorized recreational dredging and prospecting is permitted on the Merced. No new mining claims will be allowed on the South Fork Merced River. Recreational panning is allowed.

#### SOCIO-ECONOMICS:

*What effect will the limits of acceptable change (LAC) implementation process have on the existing commercial permittees who operate rafting or stock packing operations for the public on federal lands? What commercial resort activities should occur on federal lands?*

#### RESOLUTION:

The Wild and Scenic Rivers are located near several Sierra mountain foothill communities. Management direction would directly affect their economies. There are short and long term positive economic effects to the local communities as a result of the existing commercial rafting, recreational mining, recreational camping and day use hiking activities within the Merced and South Fork river corridors.

In Alternative B, there would be no long term positive economic effects as no further development is planned. In Alternative A, the effects would be the same as Alternative B. Under Alternative D, the economic effects to the local communities in this Alternative will be increased in proportion to Alternative A, B and C. More developments, increased commercial rafting allocations, more improved access opportunities would have a positive effect to the local communities and local permittee. In Alternative C, the positive economic effects to the local communities and permittee will be increased as compared to Alternative A and B.

#### THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES:

*How are the sensitive plants found in the W&SR corridor going to be protected from the public? What effect will the construction and maintenance of roads, trails and rights of way have on the T & E species?*

#### RESOLUTION:

The limestone salamander is a State listed "Threatened" species. The bald eagle is listed on both the Federal and State endangered species lists. Both species can be found along the Merced River. There are 18 plant species referenced as rare, threatened, or endangered found along the South Fork Merced. This list includes *Clarkia lingulata*, listed by the State of California as endangered, and the rarest plant known in the Sierra National Forest.

See the "Vegetation" and "Wildlife" sections for specific effects to T & E species. In summary, there are moderate effects to T & E species in Alternative A and D and there

may be minimal effects in Alternative B and C depending on the public use controls. T & E species will be protected.

#### VEGETATION:

*Are vegetation management plans necessary within the W&SR corridors?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Vegetation in the corridors consists mostly of live oak-digger pine woodlands. There are very narrow strips of riparian vegetation immediately adjacent to the rivers, with a background of chaparral and annual grasses. Between El Portal and Briceburg are five species of Forest Service Region 5 listed Sensitive plants growing adjacent to the river. Spectacular wildflower displays occur along the South Fork Merced River in the springtime.

Under Alternative B, there will be minimal or no effects to the vegetation resource. In Alternative A, there will be moderate effects to the vegetative resources including T&E species because of increased public use. In Alternative D, there will be moderate effects to the vegetative resource because of proposed developments. Under Alternative C, there may be minimal or no effects to the vegetative resource because there will be adequate management of public use. Vegetation management plans would not be necessary because there are no major developments planned in Alternative C. Management actions in the Plan were designed to maintain maximum biological diversity in the W&SR.

#### VISUAL RESOURCES:

*How can the naturally appearing landscape viewed from within the river corridor be maintained or improved? Will all the planned activities and improvement meet the criteria of visually not evident or visually subordinate when implemented?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Visual quality of the area is distinctive. The Merced is viewed from 28 miles of highway, while one drives through a beautiful whitewater river canyon. The South Fork is mostly viewed from 18 miles of hiking trail which passes through deep, primitive 2,000' "V" shaped canyons.

Under Alternative B, select facilities would be upgraded to meet the visual quality standards. Management activities would be either visually not evident or subordinate to the existing landscape. In Alternative A, facilities would be upgraded for health and safety reasons and would meet partial retention and existing modifications visual quality objectives. Facilities would be visually evident and could be subordinate to the existing landscape. Under Alternative D, facilities would be designed to be visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape. In Alternative C, all new and rehabilitated facilities would be upgraded to meet retention or partial retention visual quality objectives. Management activities would be designed to be visually not evident, or subordinate, to the characteristic landscape.

#### WATER RESOURCES:

*How will the water quality of the South Fork Merced and Merced River and its watershed be maintained?*

#### RESOLUTION:

Water quality of the Merced and South Fork Merced and is good.

All Alternatives protect water quality of all existing streams through use of Best Management Practices (BMPs). Some specific BMP's are identified in the Plan. Stream-side management zones (SMZ) and riparian management areas will be established. Motorized vehicles within streamside management Recreational

(Merced) and Scenic (South Fork Merced) except at approved put-in and take-outs for water craft (Merced only) will be prohibited. All necessary facilities and services will be located outside riparian zones. Livestock grazing will be managed to protect water quality of the streams and rivers and their riparian ecosystems.

All Alternatives propose the construction of sanitation facilities at selected rafting put-ins and take-outs to facilitate water quality protection. Rafting permittees will be required to provide portable sanitation facilities for the put-ins, swimming holes, and lunch stops that do not have permanent facilities. To protect water quality, appropriate BMP's will be implemented to manage dispersed campsites and other recreation sites adjacent to river and streams.

## 5.0 THE DECISION

Based on the analysis presented in the FEIS, I have selected Alternative C for the management of the Merced and South Fork Merced River corridors. This alternative was formulated to meet the intent of PL 100-149 by providing a balance of outdoor recreation use along with the protection of resource values within these designated Wild and Scenic rivers.

My decision provides for the management of the 29 miles of designated Merced and South Fork Merced W&SR corridor that are within public lands administered by the Forest Service. The decision also includes the Forest Service's half of a 3 mile South Fork River segment that is jointly managed by the Forest Service and National Park Service.

The BLM will issue a separate decision concerning adoption of Alternative C for the four mile segment of W&SR that they administer.

## 6.0 RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

This section describes the basis for my selection of Alternative C. These considerations were derived from the issues identified during the scoping process, the analysis and review of previous planning efforts, as well as from written public comments on the DEIS/Plan.

No single factor determined the decision. Among the many factors I considered were how well the various Alternatives would meet the stated purpose and need. I considered the evaluation of direct, indirect (off-site) and cumulative effects in making this decision. My considerations included the effects associated with the development of camping sites on the Merced River's Incline road, agreeing with the possible joint agency Merced's Canyon hiking/horse/mountain bike trail on the old railroad grade, allowing public motorized access only on the south side of the Hite Cove route, allowing the construction of one pedestrian bridge and one pedestrian/equestrian bridge along the South Fork Merced River Trail. I considered

adverse effects which cannot be avoided, short-term uses versus long-term productivity, and identification of irreversible or irretrievable actions. These factors are described in detail in the alternative comparison section of Chapter 2.0 and Chapter 4.0 of the FEIS.

In my judgment, Alternative C best satisfies the overall mix of public and Forest Service issues, objectives and opportunities. It strikes a reasonable balance between providing outdoor recreation opportunities and protecting the natural, archaeological, and scenic resources, and providing for appropriate fisheries and wildlife management.

Most of the issues were satisfactorily resolved by all of the Alternatives considered, including Alternative C. There are negligible differences between Alternatives for the issues of fire, fuels management, geology, minerals, soils, Threatened and Endangered Species, vegetation, and wildlife.

Important components supporting my selection of Alternative C for the W&SR include:

- \*Retaining the existing character of the rivers by leaving them basically as they are today. The long term protection and preservation of the area's natural, archaeological, fish and wildlife and scenic resources will be preserved with this Alternative.

- \*Providing designated camping along Incline Road as proposed in Alternative C will help mitigate the potential fire, sanitation, riparian, private resident conflicts and overall resource problems attributed to the existing overused dispersed public camping within this area.

- \*Retaining the existing public OHV use to the south side and the existing hiking use to the north side of Hite Cove on the South Fork Merced River as recommended in Alternative C will provide access to both user groups. The closure on the north side of the river will also help preserve the existing historic, archaeological, water and wildlife resource values of this sensitive area. Future analysis of Forest OHV use recommending a change to this decision will require an EIS/Plan amendment.

- \*Providing visitors, as described in Alternative C, with an opportunity to traverse much of the South Fork canyon from Bishop Creek to the confluence of the Merced River during the spring and winter will bring a special new experience to hiking visitors. The construction of one pedestrian bridge at Hite Cove and one equestrian/pedestrian bridge at Devils Gulch across the South Fork Merced will help facilitate this access. The existing natural water crossings are dangerous as most crossings occur during peak water flow (spring/fall). I therefore decided that pedestrian-type bridges would be beneficial to the visitors.

## 7.0 ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Based on physical and biological factors, Alternative B is the overall environmentally preferable Alternative for the "Scenic" zone, since it proposes a reduction in recreation activities and related impacts by recommending the elimination of the existing motorized (OHV) use into this zone. This Alternative also proposes no pedestrian bridges in the "Scenic" or "Wild" zones.

However, based on the same physical and biological factors, Alternative C is the environmentally preferable Alternative for the "Recreation" zone, since it proposes the elimination of dispersed camping and converts this use to the more fire resource safe-developed camping sites along the Incline Road.

## 8.0 IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Alternative C will not be implemented sooner than 30 days after the Notice of Availability of the FEIS appears in the Federal Register. The time needed to implement all activities as described in the Plan will vary depending on the type of action, and the amount of further planning needed for specific activities and site planning.

Monitoring for Alternative C is described in the Plan. Monitoring is important to ensure that implementation of this decision occurs as planned and to evaluate the effectiveness of project designs and mitigation measures in meeting the stated objectives. The monitoring plan identifies: standards for resource quality, monitoring procedures, monitoring personnel, frequency, and variability signaling further action. Specific resources that will be monitored include: cultural resources, water quality, trail and roads, threatened and endangered species, recreation activities, soil erosion and others. This monitoring plan is the result of utilizing the analysis process of "Limits of Acceptable Change", which focuses on setting and meeting specific objectives for management. A more detailed explanation of this process is included in the Appendix of the Plan.

## 9.0 RIGHT TO ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR 217. Any written notice of appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9, "Content of a Notice of Appeal", including the reasons for appeal and must be filed with:

F. Dale Robertson, Chief  
Forest Service - Appeals  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
201 14th Street, S.W.  
Auditor's Building at Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

A Notice of Appeal must be filed with the Reviewing Officer within 45 days of the date legal notice of this decision appears in the Sacramento Bee, Sacramento, California. Appellants must submit two copies of a Notice of Appeal.

For further information contact:

James L. Boynton, Forest Supervisor  
Sierra National Forest  
1600 Tollhouse Road  
Clovis, CA 93612  
(209) 487-5155

  
Ronald E. Stewart  
Regional Forester

NOV 25 1991  
date