

A treasured California river under threat

-- by Ronald Stork

Last year, led by a bi-partisan coalition of Congressmen from the southern and central San Joaquin Valley, the U.S. House of Representatives voted, for the first time since the passage of the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, to de-designate a portion of a wild & scenic river in



photo: © Mike Osborne

Merced River at North Fork downstream into encroachment

order to put a reservoir in it. In this case, it is the iconic Merced River, perhaps best known as the river of Yosemite Valley.

This year, the Congressional effort is being championed by Rep. Tom McClintock, who characterized the National Wild & Scenic Rivers System as “truly outrageous red tape.” Original co-sponsors of McClintock’s bill HR 934 included Representatives Doug La Malfa, Jeff Denham (who sponsored the bill last Congress), Jim Costa, Devin Nunes, David Valadao, and House minority whip Kevin McCarthy.

Passed in 1968, the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act sought to balance the decades and even centuries of alterations to this nation’s waterways by the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Soil Conservation Service, and

legions of private, municipal, and state dam, reservoir, and canal builders. It asserted the value to our society of leaving some rivers wild, free and undammed.

The central focus of this statute is to ensure that rivers remain free-flowing with the beds and banks of protected rivers in a natural state. Designated rivers have been widely regarded as “permanently protected.” Mr. McClintock, perhaps with an eye to even greater prizes, is now seeking to take the “permanent” out of “permanently protected.”

HR 934 would de-designate about a half a mile of the Wild and Scenic Merced River just upstream of Lake McClure Reservoir in the Sierra foothills northeast of Merced (about 35 miles downstream from Yosemite Valley) to advance the Merced Irrigation District’s speculative bid to expand their reservoir. The expanded reservoir would inundate portions of two different Areas of Critical Environmental Concern administered by the Bureau of Land Management as well as parts of the agency’s Merced River Wilderness Study Area. In addition, an expanded reservoir would

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illegally drown terrestrial limestone salamanders, a state fully protected species.

The project, as proposed, could result in the failure of the District’s New Exchequer Dam and would add only about 2.5 percent to the water yield of this project, which already occupies 32 miles of the Merced River downstream. Indeed, this dam, unlike a few of its neighbors, has never even filled and spilled.

Last year, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Com-

Next Wilderness meeting Sunday, June 2, San Francisco

The next meeting of the Sierra Club’s California/Nevada Wilderness Committee will take place Sunday, June 2, at Sierra Club headquarters in downtown San Francisco. Join us for fun, networking, food, and timely presentations on worthwhile wildlands topics—including organizing for California events for the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act next year. 10 am to 5 pm, possible dinner afterwards. Come a day early for a Saturday hike near the south end of the Bay. All interested wildlands advocates invited. Contact Vicky: vicky.hoover@sierraclub.org.

mittee failed to take up this measure. Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), the new chair of the Committee, has not indicated his perspective on HR 934, although Senator Dianne Feinstein has indicated her sympathy with the goals of the House effort. Senator Barbara Boxer has not spoken on the issue.

The Sierra Club has opposed the Merced de-designation bill. This bill’s re-introduction is not a proud day for America. We certainly will try to ensure that the bill fails again. American’s don’t vandalize our National Wild & Scenic River System any more than we vandalize our National Park System. At least I hope not. ☞

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photo: Ron Stork

Downstream of Yosemite National Park, the Bureau of Land Management cares for the designated river