

PUBLIC LANDS:

Bid to remove scenic designation on Merced River stirs controversy

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Lawmakers from California's San Joaquin Valley are hoping to remove the "wild and scenic river" designation from part of the Merced River.

The change in status could allow officials to enlarge Lake McClure, which is a reservoir along the Merced River. The move would allow the lake to hold more water during wet years so communities could use its resources when water is scarce. Last year, Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.) offered legislation to ax the status for a half-mile section. The measure cleared the House but failed to pass in the Senate.

Similar legislation is expected this session.

Opponents of the proposal worry it would violate the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. They said it would mark the first time federal protection on a river was removed in order to flood it. "Wild and scenic" protections have been lifted for other reasons, however.

Such a move would be a "precipitous action," says the U.S. Department of the Interior, which manages part of the designated section of the river. But the Merced Irrigation District, an agency that manages Lake McClure and provides water, supports the measure.

Several rivers on California's north coast are protected under the "wild and scenic" status. The battle may be a harbinger for future water fights in the San Francisco Bay and its delta as well as adjoining rivers. (*Justin Scheck, [Wall Street Journal](#), Jan. 9*). -- **WW**