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Merced River protection should be kept

By Tim Palmer

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Spanning nearly half a century of American history, the Wild and Scenic Rivers system has been backed by eight presidents and by Congresses in virtually every session. The preamble of this bipartisan legislation states that "certain selected rivers ... shall be preserved in free-flowing condition." Stressing the need for balance, this product of statesmanship recognized "that the established national policy of dam and other construction ... needs to be complemented by a policy that would preserve other selected rivers or sections thereof in their free-flowing condition."



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

A group walks along the scenic Merced River close to its source, near Swinging Bridge in Yosemite Valley.

For decades, California has been a leader in the illustrious journey that followed this policy directive. The Middle Fork of the Feather River was among the first National Wild and Scenic Rivers, safeguarded while Ronald Reagan was governor. Gov. Jerry Brown engaged the Carter administration to secure protection of multiple North Coast rivers slated for damming. President George W. Bush designated two California rivers in 2006. President Obama added 10 more.

Highlighting this remarkable network as the most iconic river of the Golden State, the Merced tumbles out of Yosemite Valley and into the Sierra foothills - its protection the result of a popular groundswell and decisive congressional agreements in both 1987 and 1992.

Escaping the rancor that typifies political debates today, this system of protected waterways has never faced a serious effort to undermine its meaning or effectiveness. Until now.

A bill to take the lower end of the Merced River out of the Wild and Scenic Rivers system has passed the House and awaits Senate action. It would break a long tradition of good faith built around a program as significant as our national parks. It would be like slicing off the end of Yosemite for a shopping mall because a developer suddenly said he was interested.

An extreme irony here is that the encroachment would gain a mere 12,000 acre-feet of water for the Merced Irrigation District, an agency that already delivers 500,000 acre feet

(even more is diverted by others). Improved efficiency through measures such as drip and sprinkler irrigation, timing of water application and reuse of irrigation water can in many cases supply multiples of what a sacrificed Merced River would yield. Here, the balance championed in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act has been struck: four dams already block the flow. Of the Merced's 145 miles, only 60 miles are protected. Now we find that even they are imperiled.

While the threatened half-mile is not great, the compromises have been made, and if a river as beloved as the Merced is up for grabs, what's next? America's magnificent system of protected rivers — which accounts for less than 0.25 percent of the rivers and streams of the nation — is on the chopping block for a pittance of water.

Through the past two decades, the Merced and all the National Wild and Scenic Rivers have survived unscathed through a political era when even the Clean Water Act was besieged. Today, those who challenge this river's protection would become the first to undermine the national promise that a select few of our very finest rivers will always flow free.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/Merced-River-protection-should-be-kept-4295329.php>

FOR annotation: Department of the Interior estimates at the time of designation estimated that the Merced River miles to be designated would be 82. Thirty-two and a half miles of the Merced River are devoted to reservoirs. H.R. 2578, the bill to de-designate a portion of the Merced, failed to be taken up by the Senate in the last Congress. No bill is currently pending in the House or Senate, but one could be introduced at any time.