

## Conservation group puts Merced River on its endangered list over dam plan

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Al Golub 041502-Modesto Bee  
Looking South from the North road in Yosemite Valley you can see Bridal Vail Falls and the Merced River in the foreground. Spring time is the best time to see the Water Falls in Yosemite National park.

MERCED -- American Rivers, a national river conservation group, called attention to the Merced River on Tuesday by naming it on the “most endangered rivers” list for 2013.

Steve Rothert, California regional director with American Rivers, said the Merced River was mentioned because of a proposed reservoir expansion project.

The \$40 million venture would expand reservoir capacity by up to 70,000 acre-feet by raising the spillway as much as 10 feet at its main storage reservoir, Lake McClure.

The project, supported by legislation from Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, and Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, would remove protections provided by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act from part of the Merced River.

The legislation would allow the expansion project to be studied, but it would still need federal approval.

Currently, more than 120 miles of the Merced River are protected. However, the legislation proposes moving the protected boundary about a half-mile upstream from where it flows into Lake McClure, allowing the reservoir to store more water during wet years.

If approved, the proposal would be the first time a Wild and Scenic boundary has been changed [to replace it with a reservoir], Rothert said, and would set a harmful precedent nationwide.

“What is supposed to be permanent protection by the Wild and Scenic Act is no longer protected,” Rothert said. “The legislation would make a change to what’s supposed to be a permanent boundary before MID has determined that it’s a viable project.”



MARCI STENBERG- Merced Sun-Star  
Raging Merced River near El Portal on Highway 140, Tuesday, May 1, 2012.

The Merced Irrigation District officials said Tuesday the project would only affect about 1,800 feet of the Merced River.

“This bill is narrowly focused on Merced River and only affects a very small portion of it,” said Mike Jensen, MID spokesman. “And all that MID is asking is for the opportunity to presents its best case for this project to proceed.”

Jensen said the legislation allows the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission authority to review the project, and it would ultimately require the commission’s approval.

“All the legislation does is allow FERC the authority to review the project,” he said. “But in no way does it change the outcome of anything and we’re open to discussing these issues.”

But Rothert said the project threatens the Limestone Salamander, a species that is fully protected by state law, because the extra water would periodically flood about a half-mile of the Merced River.

“Biologists believe if the reservoir were changed by raising the spillway by 10 feet, it would flood out the salamanders,” he noted.

According to Jensen, that issue would be among others considered in the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s review. “It would be reviewed before we could proceed with the project,” he said.

Rothert questioned whether the project is viable for MID customers. “We’re not aware of an analysis of the full -cost of the project and the cost of the water that would be produced by it,” he said.

However, Jensen said that agriculture is a third of the economy in Merced County, and that the project would provide water to growers during dry years.

Jensen said MID officials are not requesting federal sources to pay for the project, but will put together a capital improvement plan.

In June 2012, the same bill was carried by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, and was approved by a House vote, but didn’t make it through the senate.

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<http://www.mercedsunstar.com/2013/04/16/2949043/conservation-group-puts-merced.html>