

MERCED RIVER PLANNING UNIT

Stanislaus River Watershed

Existing Conditions & Uses

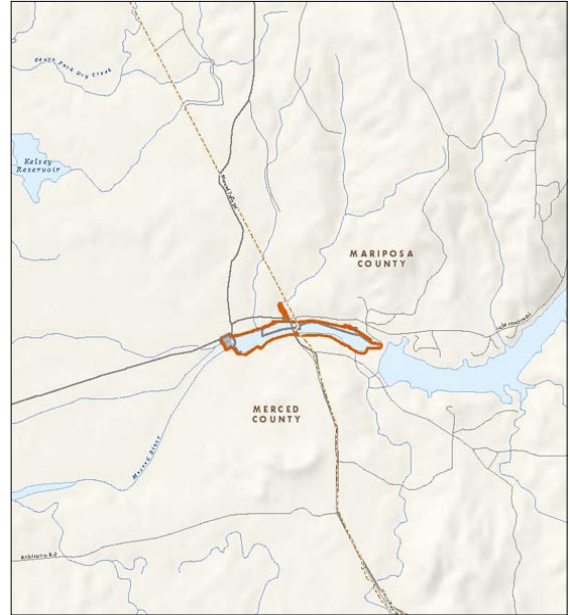
Overview

- Offers a rural setting for fishing, swimming, and non-motorized boating
- 21 acres on the border of Merced and Mariposa Counties; 3 acres outside the FERC boundary and 18 acres inside the FERC boundary
- Part of the Merced Falls Project (FERC #2467); relicensing scheduled to begin in 2009 as the current License expires in 2014

Merced Falls Reservoir is rural in character, surrounded by open grassland with woody vegetation lining the riverbank. At an elevation of approximately 350 feet, the planning unit is located approximately 15 miles east of the City of Merced and straddles the Mariposa-Merced county line. As shown in Figure SR-7, the Merced River Planning Unit contains the Merced Falls Reservoir and Powerhouse, as well as portions of several intermittent streams and the Merced River. County Road J-16 provides direct access to the planning unit, and State Highways 59, 49, and 140 provide access to the vicinity.



Boat launch at the Merced Falls Fishing Access



Merced River Planning Unit
Merced & Mariposa Counties

Fish, Plant, and Wildlife Habitat

The Merced River Planning Unit provides habitat for various aquatic species, including coldwater habitat in the Merced River, and various lake habitats in Merced Falls Reservoir. Kern Brook lamprey, a special status species, is found in the Merced River near Merced Falls.¹

Open grasslands with woody vegetation, including oak, cottonwood, willow, and alder, is the dominant vegetation type in the Merced River Planning Unit. Over 90% of riparian vegetation once found in the San Joaquin Valley has been lost, primarily to agriculture, and the riparian woodlands found along the Merced River are among the most important remaining in the valley. Plant surveys conducted in the planning unit found no special status plants, although populations of the beaked clarkia were mapped just to the north. Vernal pools are found in the northern-most parcel and on adjacent lands.

Open Space

The open space character of the San Joaquin Valley is maintained throughout the planning unit. The western portion of the planning unit has



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a rural land use designation of Foothill Pasture, as indicated in the Merced County General Plan. This land use designation is used for non-cultivated agricultural practices, mineral resource extraction and processing, institutional facilities, and outdoor public and private recreational facilities. The Mariposa County General Plan has designated the eastern half of the planning unit as Agriculture/Working Landscape. This classification identifies lands where the primary use is the production of agriculture, timber, or mining for economic benefit, which incidentally have scenic value and appear as open space areas.

Outdoor Recreation

The Merced River Planning Unit provides opportunities for various types of water-based recreation. The reservoir offers day use opportunities for nearby residents, such as fishing, swimming, non-motorized boating, and picnicking. Catchable trout are stocked annually in Merced Falls Reservoir by DFG. Fishing access to Merced Falls Reservoir is available from the County Road J-16 Bridge as well as along the northern portion of the reservoir. PG&E's River's Edge Fishing Access, located in the far northwest portion of the planning unit, provides a day use area with parking (see Figure SR-7). In the northeast portion of the reservoir, the Merced Falls Fishing Access, managed by the Merced Irrigation District (MID), is available for angling and day use recreation. The Merced Falls Fishing Access includes a PG&E-installed boat launch, restrooms, and a large parking lot.

Numerous additional recreation opportunities are found within a seven-mile radius of the planning unit. The Lake McSwain and Lake McClure Recreational Areas, located immediately upstream of the Merced Falls Reservoir, offer camping and water-based recreation.

Forest Resources

Minimal forest resources and no PG&E Timber Management Units (TMUs) are found in the Merced River Planning Unit. As such, no

sustainable forestry enhancement measures are recommended for the area.

Agricultural Uses

Cattle grazing is common on adjacent lands and a horse grazing pasture is located on the southwestern side of the reservoir, however, no agricultural uses occur within the Merced River Planning Unit. Agricultural uses are not recommended for the planning unit due to the limited acreage and disconnected distribution of parcels. Likewise, the location of the planning unit, directly adjacent to the reservoir and powerhouse facilities, makes future agricultural uses of this area unlikely.

Historic Resources

Evidence of past mining, in the form of dredger tailings, is found along the Merced River within the FERC boundary. There are no known state historical landmarks, points of historical interest, or NRHP-listed sites located in the vicinity of the project. Some 15% of the land within the FERC boundary has been surveyed, but no cultural sites have been found.



Interpretive sign by River's Edge Fishing Access

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Stewardship Council Recommendations

The Stewardship Council recommends that the land and land uses in the Merced River Planning Unit be preserved and enhanced by focusing on the opportunities to enhance day use recreation experiences as well as habitat values of the region. In presenting the Recommended Concept provided here, our objective is to preserve and enhance appropriate recreational opportunities while also protecting biological and cultural resources. We recommend this effort be conducted in close coordination with PG&E and the upcoming relicensing efforts to ensure consistency with proposed studies and subsequent actions to avoid a duplication of efforts.

Objective: Preserve biological and cultural resources, as well as enhance the recreation experience.

As shown on Table SR-4, The Stewardship Council has identified a number of preservation and/or enhancement measures that may contribute to the conservation management program for the Merced River Planning Unit. Additional detail and background regarding these potential measures can be found in the Supporting Analysis for Recommendations, provided under separate cover. These measures are intended to be illustrative in nature, not prescriptive, and will be amended, deleted, or augmented over time in coordination with future land owners and managers to best meet the objective for the planning unit.

Fish, Plant, and Wildlife Habitat

Objective: Preserve and enhance habitat in order to protect special biological resources.

The Merced River Planning Unit consists of important habitat in an area mostly surrounded by private agricultural lands. In order to preserve and enhance the habitat and resources

found here, as well as the recreational fishery that depends on this natural environment, the Stewardship Council recommends that baseline studies be conducted to gain a clear understanding of the resources (particularly outside the relicensing study area where little information is currently available or will be provided by relicensing studies). We also recommend an assessment of the impacts of grazing on adjacent lands to determine if any habitat enhancement measures are necessary. If found necessary, these studies will be followed by management plans to ensure implementation of preservation and enhancement measures for specific resources. Habitat preservation and enhancement measures should be consistent with future FERC relicensing efforts.

Open Space

Objective: Preserve open space in order to protect natural and cultural resources and the recreation setting.

This concept would preserve open space by limiting new construction to minor additions of recreation facilities, as well as through permanent conservation easements. Conservation easements would describe all prohibited uses to maintain open space values, including the level of uses allowed and the requirement to maintain scenic qualities.



County bridge over the Merced Falls Reservoir

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Outdoor Recreation

Objective: Enhance recreational facilities in order to provide additional public access, education opportunities, and enhance the recreation experience.

The Merced River Planning Unit is an important local recreational area offering fishing, swimming, non-motorized boating, and picnicking. As shown in Figure SR-8, the Stewardship Council looks to enhance these opportunities by recommending modest enhancements to recreational facilities along the northern shore of Merced Falls Reservoir. We recommend enhancements focused on providing a trail connecting the two day use areas found along the reservoir, providing day use amenities along this trail, enhancing the existing River's Edge Fishing Access area, as well as developing a recreation and interpretive program for youth groups. These facilities and amenities would serve to enhance recreation uses of this popular local day use area. We recommend these enhancements be considered in close cooperation with PG&E as well as upcoming FERC relicensing efforts and related recreation planning.

Preservation of Historic Values

Objective: Identify cultural resources in order to ensure their protection.

Little is currently known about the presence of cultural resources in the Merced River Planning Unit. The Stewardship Council aims to support an increased understanding of these resources and ensure they are appropriately protected. To meet this objective, we recommend that cultural resource studies be conducted to understand the resources, and that potential opportunities to support public education regarding cultural resources be considered. Throughout this effort, the Council recommends close coordination with Native American entities and future FERC relicensing efforts.



Merced Falls Fishing Access (looking south)

Endnote

¹ The fish ladder at Merced Falls once allowed anadromous fish to move upstream to spawn, but this fish ladder became inoperable after the Crocker Huffman Dam was constructed in 1988.



Merced Falls Reservoir & fishing access parking lot

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Table SR-4 Objectives to Preserve and/or Enhance – Recommended Concept

Planning Unit Objective: Preserve biological and cultural resources, as well as enhance the recreation experience.		
Beneficial Public Value	Objective	Potential Measures to Preserve and/or Enhance BPVs – Not Requirements*
Protection of the Natural Habitat of Fish, Wildlife, and Plants	Preserve and enhance habitat in order to protect special biological resources.	• Conduct surveys outside the relicensing study area to identify biological resources and enable their protection. • Investigate the impacts of grazing to determine necessary habitat enhancement measures.
Preservation of Open Space	Preserve open space in order to protect natural and cultural resources and the recreation setting.	• Apply permanent conservation easements to ensure a higher level of open space protection.
Outdoor Recreation by the General Public	Enhance recreational facilities in order to provide additional public access, education opportunities, and enhance the recreation experience.	• Assess the potential to extend a trail from the county bridge to the River’s Edge Fishing Access in coordination with adjacent landowners.** • Add amenities to the PG&E-owned portion of the proposed trail in the northern section of the reservoir.** • Enhance facility amenities at the River’s Edge Fishing Access.** • Develop a recreation and interpretive program for youth groups.
Sustainable Forestry		None proposed.
Agricultural Uses		None proposed.
Preservation of Historic Values	Identify cultural resources in order to ensure their protection.	• Conduct surveys outside the relicensing study area to identify cultural resources and enable their protection in coordination with Native American entities.

* This is a set of recommended possibilities for the preservation and enhancement of BPV’s, and is not intended to be a set of requirements for future land management.

** Denotes site specific measure.

Merced River Planning Unit Recommended Concept



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Merced River Planning Unit

Outdoor Recreation

Two relatively large recreation areas, the Lake McSwain and Lake McClure Recreational Areas, are located within seven miles of the Merced Falls Planning Unit. The proximity of these two large recreation areas favors the continued use of the planning unit for local, low volume day use activities. These activities would support local interest in promoting the rural and open character of Merced Falls and its environs. Moreover, the recommended recreation enhancements not only aim to meet current recreation needs, but also anticipate future needs of an increasing population associated with the recently opened University of California Merced campus, located approximately 30 minutes away. All enhancements recommended by the Stewardship Council would be coordinated with recreation studies during upcoming relicensing efforts.

Potential Measure:

- *Assess the potential to extend a trail from the county bridge to the River's Edge Fishing Access in coordination with adjacent landowners.*

Possible recreation enhancements would include those that promote the recreation experience in the area. The Stewardship Council recommends an assessment of the potential to extend a walking trail along the northern portion of the Merced Reservoir, connecting the Merced Falls and River's Edge Fishing Accesses. Since a paved trail already exists from the Merced Falls Fishing Access to the county bridge, only a half-mile extension would be needed to reach the River's Edge Fishing Access. As this trail extension would pass through private lands, its development would need to be coordinated with adjacent landowners, as right-of-way easements would be required in the event that the trail is developed.

Potential Measures:

- *Add amenities to the PG&E-owned portion of the proposed trail in the northern section of the reservoir.*
- *Enhance facility amenities at the River's Edge Fishing Access.*

The Stewardship Council also recommends the addition of day use amenities on the PG&E-owned portion of the trail west of the county bridge. These amenities would include locating a bench, drinking fountain, and trash receptacle for the benefit of trail users. At the River's Edge Fishing Access, the addition of amenities, such as picnic tables and benches, would improve the recreation experience at this site. To support angling, an ADA fishing platform would be provided for fishing enthusiasts.

Potential Measure:

- *Develop a recreation and interpretive program for youth groups.*

The Stewardship Council recommends exploring the potential to utilize the planning unit to host local school groups and youth programs, particularly for day use recreation. Participants would be able to enjoy water-based activities at Merced Falls Reservoir such as boating, fishing, and swimming. Additionally, interpretive opportunities related to the history of the San Joaquin Valley in one of the last remaining areas with grasslands and riparian woodland would be developed to provide outdoor education to these groups, as well as other members of the public.

Fish, Plant, and Wildlife Habitat

Potential Measure:

- *Conduct surveys outside the relicensing study area to identify biological resources and enable their protection.*

As previously mentioned, the vast majority of grasslands and riparian woodland have been lost in the San Joaquin Valley, putting increased habitat value on the patches that remain. The Stewardship Council recommends conducting surveys outside the relicensing study area to identify biological resources. Additional surveys would be conducted of vernal pools in the northern portion of the planning unit to better understand this important habitat, which hosts various special status species. The results of these surveys would provide the baseline information for any necessary habitat enhancements for species as well as for their protection. If necessary, a wildlife and habitat management plan would be developed in coordination with expected relicensing studies.

Potential Measure:

- *Investigate the impacts of grazing to determine necessary habitat enhancement measures.*

While no grazing exists within the project area, cattle and horse grazing are found on adjacent private lands. Impacts of grazing on adjacent lands to planning unit lands would be assessed to determine the need for habitat enhancement measures such as erosional control to protect project waterways, riparian habitat, and water quality.

Preservation of Historic Values

Potential Measure:

- *Conduct surveys outside the relicensing study area to identify cultural resources and enable their protection in coordination with Native American entities.*

The Stewardship Council also recommends that surveys be conducted outside the relicensing study area to identify cultural resources and enable their protection. Only a small portion of the planning unit has been surveyed for cultural resources, so this measure would support the necessary protection and enhancement of cultural resources in the Merced River Planning Unit. Documentation of cultural sites should be coordinated with Native American entities and upcoming relicensing efforts.

Open Space

Potential Measure:

- *Apply permanent conservation easements to ensure a higher level of open space protection.*

Additionally, the Stewardship Council recommends preserving open space values through permanent conservation easements. Conservation easements would describe all prohibited uses to maintain open space values, including the level of uses allowed. Recommendations include only minor recreation development and are therefore not expected to decrease the scenic quality of the viewsheds.

Sustainable Forestry

None recommended.

Agricultural Uses

None recommended.