

MARIPOSA COUNTY

Merced River Trail Community Working Group

MEETING MINUTES

DATE: August 19, 2021
TIME: 10:00 AM
LOCATION: TELECONFERENCE ONLY

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Goralnik called the meeting to order at: 10:06 AM

Members Present: Michael Martin, Wendy Brown, Nick Ross-Rhudy, Tony McDaniel, Jessica Thompson, Dean Bernacchi, Rosemarie Smallcombe,

Members Absent: Jeff Gabe, Art Baggett, Ralph Mendershausen, Ben Goger

Visitors: Dean Gould, Tara Fouch-Moore

2. **APPROVE THE MINUTES FROM THE 7/15/21 MEETING:** The minutes from this meeting were unanimously approved.

3. **DISCUSSION WITH SIERRA NATIONAL FOREST LEADERSHIP:**

Dean Gould, Superintendent of Sierra National Forest, was present to answer some questions from the community working group and discuss USFS involvement in the project. Additionally, Superintendent Gould provided the following responses to the CWG's questions:

1. *What is the position of the Sierra NF on the extension/development of the MRT?* The Forest sees value in and supports the trail project, but is primarily focused on dealing with the impacts of catastrophic wildfires. Due to this, the Forest has limited resources to dedicate to the trail. They can provide support in terms of checking in with specialists and technical experts, and encouraged the County to consider partnering with USFS to secure funding through the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) to support the project in the next several years. Note that if projects are approved/endorsed for GAOA funding, the forest is obligated to follow through.
2. *With the river being the boundary between Sierra and Stanislaus National Forests, how do the two jurisdictions typically collaborate on issues/projects that span (or are located along) the border? What documents/agreements govern the jurisdictions of the Stanislaus NF and the Sierra NF along their joint boundaries?* SNF has been delegated responsibility for managing the river, largely on behalf of STF. Operationally, the Sierra operates as a member of the larger Southern Sierra Zone which includes the other forests in the region (Sierra, Stanislaus, Inyo, and Sequoia). This means that each forest coordinates to determine and recommend regional priorities, with decisions and projects advanced as a zone, rather than by individual USFS units.
3. *Does the response to the recent algal bloom in the South Fork of the Merced provide an example or case study of this interjurisdictional collaboration?* Yes.
4. *Our understanding is that SNF is responsible for managing the camp sites and other recreation amenities on Incline Road (McClendon Beach, Indian Flat, Dry Gulch, Dirt Flat)? Is this accurate, and if so, does SNF have any concerns or foresee any issues with the trail potentially increasing use of existing SNF-managed recreation resources along Incline Road?* Yes, this is accurate. If the trail improvements were put in place, it likely would result in a larger number of visitors, resulting in more demand on the existing USFS recreation resources, including trash,

waste, and out-of-bounds parking. Conducting an estimate into increased visitation and adjusting campgrounds and other amenities could be a “packaged deal” from a funding perspective.

5. *What is the current USFS policy regarding e-bikes? What consequences to people face when apprehended using OHVs or other motorized modes in areas where they are not allowed, including portions of the Merced River Trail in the Wild and Scenic River corridor?* OHV users are typically responsible stewards and users of the land. However, there are individuals who do occasionally do damage through their use, which results in a citation. The OHV user groups are often self-policing and able to influence members to recreate in responsible ways. Regarding e-bikes, Superintendent Gould will investigate with staff and provide more clarity.

4. DISCUSSION ON CONVERSATION WITH USFS LEADERSHIP:

A short conversation followed regarding takeaways from the presentations from the two Forest superintendents (Superintendent Gould and Superintendent Kuiken). There was excitement around the potential of pursuing Great American Outdoors Act funding to support project recommendations.

5. UPDATE ON PROJECT ACTIONS, INCLUDING POTENTIAL ROUTES:

The CWG discussed the draft actions that were proposed by the dedicated subcommittee. Discussion included adding a new draft action (or draft actions), potentially in Goal #3 that promote engagement and consultation with area Indigenous tribes to protect and preserve cultural resources and sites. After that discussion, the committee authorized staff to proceed seeking input from the general public on the draft actions developed and proposed by the subcommittee.

The CWG also had a specific discussion on the potential route options included in the meeting packet. Goralnik reminded the CWG that the County had been working with NPS (both Yosemite and RTCA) staff and staff from Stanislaus National Forest to resolve the Miller Gulch alternate route as a way to provide access to Yosemite National Park while avoiding the communities of El Portal and Foresta. He indicated that USFS is eager to pursue this route alternate because its general adherence to existing forest roads enhances the Forest’s ability to conduct vegetation management on those roads, reducing fire risk. Additionally, by staying on existing roads and requiring little to no new trail construction, this route reduces the potential for new ecological impacts. Members of the CWG remarked that a trail which connects to higher elevations in Yosemite is conceptually coherent with the premise of the project as an expression of and resource for the Merced River’s wider watershed, rather than simply the main stem of the river.

Goralnik clarified that the potential route through the Miller Gulch site and to Crane flat via existing USFS roads would be a more strenuous alternate to—but not a replacement of—the route along the historic rail grade upstream of Miller Gulch. This more adventurous, multi-day route would be a “double black diamond” complement to a shorter and less strenuous route (the “bunny slope” route) through the river canyon whose upstream terminus would be located on the downstream side of Foresta Bridge, where a boat launch currently exists. From here, trail users traveling upstream could take public transportation, such as YARTS, into Yosemite Valley, bypassing the communities of El Portal and Foresta while still gaining access to Yosemite. Goralnik indicated that future versions of the map describing the route would better reflect this concept.

6. PUBLIC COMMENT:

There was no public comment.

7. ADJOURN: The meeting adjourned the meeting at 11:35 AM.