

MARIPOSA COUNTY

Merced River Trail Community Working Group

MEETING MINUTES

DATE: July 15, 2021

TIME: 10:00 AM

LOCATION: 5100 Bullion Street, Board of Supervisors Chambers

1. **CALL TO ORDER:** Goralnik called the meeting to order at: 10:00 AM

Members Present: Michael Martin, Jeff Gabe, Tony McDaniel, Wendy Brown, Jessica Thompson, Art Baggett, Ralph Mendershausen, Dean Bernacchi, Ben Goger

Members Absent: Rosemarie Smallcombe, Nick Ross-Rhudy

Visitors: Jason Kuiken, Laura Cohen, Ben Kaufman, Tara Fouch-Moore

2. **APPROVE THE MINUTES FROM THE 6/17/21 MEETING:** The minutes from this meeting were unanimously approved with minor modifications.

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

Jason Kuiken, Superintendent of Stanislaus National Forest, was present to answer some questions from the community working group and discuss USFS involvement in the project. Input included the importance of working with partners who have a vested interest in the project and the notion of “shared stewardship” between STF and local partners. Additionally, Superintendent Kuiken provided the following responses to the CWG’s questions:

1. *What is the STF concept of the Merced River Trail (MRT) from the BLM property to El Portal along the abandoned YVRR grade, with respect to the Wild and Scenic River Record of Decision (USFS, 1991, Record of Decision, pg 3.)? What efforts in scoping, planning, and implementation have been accomplished by SNF thus far?:* Staff is providing support and guidance on federal policy and laws to help county figure out the project, while letting the county lead the effort. USFS is open to our thoughts and ideas, and will look to Mariposa County and other partners to help identify the proposal, scope it, and implement it.
2. *What is the role/position/responsibility of STF on the extension/development of the MRT? Is that role shared with the Sierra NF, and do Stanislaus NF and Sierra NF share their responsibilities?:* STF has an agreement (MOU) with SNF for shared management of some areas of the project area, namely the areas on the north side of the river for recreation and day use areas, where both STF and SNF would sign NEPA documents where necessary. Though the lead agency would depend on the proposed action, that technicality isn’t significant because STF and SNF are in the same regional “zone,” meaning that the forests would have the same staff reviewing and supporting the application document;
3. *What measures need to be taken in order to identify the MRT as a trail or trail under development in STF jurisdiction? What other barriers exist within STF to the extension/development of the MRT?:* The MRT is not a top priority for STF, for whom the current priority is to alter the risk of fire on existing community resources. Nonetheless, it’s important for Mariposa County to develop a maintenance plan and monitoring. Also, emphasizing the resiliency and wildfire risk reduction

components of the project to local/district staff can be helpful for making this project, which is primarily a recreation project, a higher priority.

4. *What types of support or encouragement can you use from the public, including NGOs, to advance the trail project? Does STF see an active volunteerism program (i.e., docents, trail maintenance, etc.) in the near future? If so, what is their vision for development and implementation?* Yes, there are good examples of exactly this model for both trail implementation and maintenance, such as the Arnold Rim Trail group. USFS can help facilitate establishment of a similar group potentially. Non-profit that can raise money, provide volunteer hours for matching.
5. *Is STF aware of any private right of way issues, along the Yosemite Valley Railroad (YVRR) grade upstream of Miller's Gulch (Emory) and the existing Incline Road public access (paved road)?* Not aware of any, but they haven't looked that closely, and that's something that can be looked at collaboratively in the future. Regarding Miller Gulch specifically, its important to note that it is difficult for USFS to implement/manage trails on easements, which complicates the notion of a trail easement on the Miller Gulch property.
6. *What existing trail/trails/roads does STF think the Merced River Trail should connect with? If a direct connection of the MRT to the South Fork Trail in Sierra National Forest were pursued, who would be the point of contact(s) to other agencies and the public for the United States Forest Service?* USFS looks forward to county leadership on that issue; they don't have a pre-designed route and are interested to see what our community recommends. Jon George is the contact at USFS for the South Fork connection.
7. *What is the condition of the Burma Road that takes off from Briceburg? Does it still connect to the Stanislaus National Forest? What type of vehicle can travel this road?* This road is a Maintenance Level 3 road, with few improvements and a natural/aggregate surface.

It was clarified that the Merced River Trail does not appear on existing USFS maps because it is not officially designated as a trail.

4. **DISCUSSION WITH RAILS TO TRAILS CONSERVANCY STAFF:**

Laura Cohen and Ben Kaufman from the Rails to Trails Conservancy introduced themselves to the CWG and shared some of their interest in the project. A short discussion ensued about topics including rail banking and the potential for RTC to provide technical support for the project.

5. **UPDATE ON PROJECT ACTIONS**

Michael Martin and Ralph Mendershausen, members of the project actions subcommittee, provided a brief update to the CWG on the progress that has been made to produce draft project actions that can be shared with the community for public comment. They shared that they met on July 1 to synthesize the draft actions that other CWG members had shared.

Jeff Gabe suggested adding some project actions pursuant to the previous conversation with STF, including the potential for encouraging the county to reinvest revenue raised through the river to the river trail. Several members stressed the importance of recommending a non-profit group to fulfill important trail management and implementation functions, and discussed whether it was preferable to be a new group or an existing group.

6. **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

There was no public comment.

7. **ADJOURN:** The meeting adjourned the meeting at 11:26 AM.