



Upper Merced River
Watershed Council

2024 - 2028



WATERSHED WORK PLAN

WORK PLAN

FRONT COVER

Merced River

Image by David Greenwood



CONTENTS

- 4 **Introduction**
 - Mission
 - Vision Statement
 - Values
 - Guiding Principles

- 8 **Who We Are**
 - Board & Staff
 - Partners

- 10 **Work Plan Objectives**

Pacific Dogwood
In bloom along Merced River
Image by Kristina Rylands

Our Mission

To protect and enhance the Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed through education, stewardship, and partnership-based projects.



VISION STATEMENT

We envision a thriving Merced River watershed, resilient to human impacts and climate change, valued and celebrated by our community for its central role in supporting life, health, and culture.

We envision a free-flowing Wild and Scenic River from the headwaters in Yosemite to the Sierra foothills, a vital tributary with connectivity to the San Joaquin and out through the Golden Gate.

We envision the role of our organization as a trusted leader, convener, and collaborator, inspiring science-informed river activism and stewardship.

LEFT - El Capitan

Kayaking the Merced River - Image by David Greenwood

OUR VALUES

Effective river and watershed stewardship relies on developing strong partnerships within the community along with an understanding of how rivers interact with their surrounding environment. In order to maximize our collective impact, the Upper Merced River Watershed Council strives to be the following:

- **A trustworthy source** - *As a clearinghouse of science-based information, we are:*
Reliable • Respectable • A Go-To Source • Dependable
Accessible • Consistent • Welcoming
- **Inclusive** - *As a growing organization, we strive for diversity, equity and inclusion, we are:*
Supportive • Curious • Open-minded • Adaptive
- **Conveners of partnerships/collaborations** - *As a partner of our community and of federal, state, tribal and local agencies, we seek broad perspectives, we are:*
Equitable • Purposeful • A Conduit • Organizers
Fosterers • Inclusive • Active Listeners
- **Focused on the river and watershed values** - *As stewards of the Merced River, we are:*
Knowledgeable • Explorative • Conscientious
Thorough • Solution-Driven • Story-sharers
- **Watershed champions** - *As advocates for the Merced River, we are:*
Protective • Attentive • Responsive • Present

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Upper Merced River Watershed Council works with federal agencies, tribes, state and local agencies, community groups, nonprofit organizations, education institutions, businesses, and the general public to:

- Protect and enhance water quality in the Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed tributaries
- Protect and enhance biological diversity and ecosystem function of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed
- Implement strategies to support ecological and community resilience in the face of climate change threats in the watershed
- Promote equitable access and appropriate, responsible recreation in the watershed
- Convene and collaborate with all who care about the river to strengthen our collective watershed protection impact
- Create a sustainable future for the Upper Merced River Watershed Council

WHO WE ARE

Board of Directors

The Upper Merced River Watershed Council is entirely managed by a Board of Directors according to the Constitution and Bylaws. The officers of the Board are Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. The Board is responsible for the management of the organization.

Objectives to support the Upper Merced River Watershed Council Board:

- Advance the mission of the organization in alignment with this Watershed Work Plan
- Grow the Board in order to expand operational effectiveness
- Serve as the advocates and ambassadors of the organization within the community
- Inspire volunteerism and expand the reach of the organization through memberships and partnerships

Staff

The Upper Merced River Watershed Council currently has no paid staff. A key objective of this Watershed Work Plan is to grow the capacity of the organization by hiring a paid staff position.

Objectives to support the Upper Merced River Watershed Council:

- Establish a staffing structure conducive to advancing the objectives and actions outlined in the Watershed Work Plan
- Secure the funding needed to hire an executive director that executes organizational priorities and fulfills objectives of the Watershed Work Plan

Partners

Partners provide our runway for growth and collaboration. They include strategically aligned tribal groups, agencies, and organizations whose members and staff are responsible for the management of Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed.

Partners include federal land management agencies mandated by law to protect and enhance the Merced Wild and Scenic River per the 1987 designation of the river, including the National Park Service in Yosemite National Park, the US Forest Service on the Stanislaus and Sierra National Forests, and the Bureau of Land Management's Mother Lode Field Office, tribal relationships with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation and others. Community partners include active leaders or influencers in regional river and natural resource-based planning organizations whose missions complement the Watershed Council's strategy such as Mariposa Trails, Merced River - Keep it Wild, the Merced River Conservation Committee, Sierra Nevada Alliance, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition, River Network, the River Management Society, Friends of the River, CalWild, CalTrans, NatureBridge, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Merced Irrigation District and more.

Partnerships provide opportunities to collaborate on projects which are mutually beneficial. Partners may also invite participation in initiatives that complement their respective missions and open doors to new relationships.

Partnerships can benefit the Upper Merced River Watershed Council by:

- Embracing diverse voices and perspectives that expand the Upper Merced River Watershed Council's reach
- Increasing exposure and awareness of the Upper Merced River Watershed Council's activities to new audiences with whom we can collaborate
- Increasing the effectiveness of initiatives that support the pursuit of Upper Merced River Watershed Council's mission
- Developing non-traditional, new resources that support revenue expansion and diversification

2024-2028 WORK PLAN OBJECTIVES

During a public planning process conducted in 2022-2023, the Upper Merced River Watershed Council consulted with federal agencies, tribal groups, community and regional partners, and the public to raise the most pressing issues facing the Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed. This Watershed Work Plan represents the range of issues identified.

During the four-year timeline for this Work Plan, the Upper Merced River Watershed Council seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Revitalize and implement a community-based water quality monitoring program in the watershed
2. Increase awareness of climate resilience opportunities in the watershed
3. Collaborate with federal partners on issues related to ecological health and biodiversity in the watershed
4. Convene agency partners and stakeholders in discussions related to visitor use management in the river corridor and watershed
5. Establish an education and awareness campaign of issues facing the river and watershed
6. Establish a strong volunteer base of river/watershed stewards
7. Grow the capacity and sustainability of the organization

Objective 1

Revitalize and implement a community-based water quality monitoring program in the watershed.

Throughout some of the Watershed Council's most difficult times, water quality monitoring has been a consistent effort. Even after the 2012 fire destroyed the Watershed Council's equipment, water quality monitoring was able to continue—albeit at a smaller scale—until the pandemic halted progress. As a program with a nearly 20-year history of continuous data and contribution to understanding of the watershed, water quality monitoring is a pillar of the Watershed Council's success and a source of pride embraced by both agency partners and the larger community.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 1a In consultation with federal partners, the Watershed Council will reinvigorate and expand its water quality monitoring program along the Merced River, seeking funding to purchase new equipment. (A River Network/USFS grant was received in July 2023 to kick off this effort.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the River Network/USFS grant by 2025 • Determine monitoring sites • Collaborate with tribes, school districts, and other NGOs to secure volunteers • Establish a quarterly monitoring calendar • Ensure annual reporting is completed to state and national databases • Report findings to the public via social media, e-newsletters, and website
<p>Strat. 1b The Watershed Council will explore the incorporation of new protocols, including monitoring of post fire events and harmful algal blooms</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with federal and state agencies and nonprofit partners to update existing and identify new protocols
<p>Strat. 1c Work with the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation on issues related to protecting and enhancing water quality in the river.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult with tribes on protocols and invite tribal participation in water quality monitoring activities

Objective 2

Increase awareness of watershed resilience in response to climate threats

As the effects of climate change intensified since the organization's inception, awareness of threats and the establishment of new climate-related objectives are needed. Impacts to forest health combined with the increase in catastrophic wildland fire underscore the importance of increasing awareness and taking steps to support federal land management agencies further forest resilience goals. In recent years, the increased presence of harmful algal blooms (HABs) has posed a threat to both ecological communities as well as public health.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 2a Participate in Mariposa County Fire Advisory Council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Join the group and consult with partners on fire resilience practices needed within the watershed
<p>Strat. 2b In collaboration with federal and state agencies and partners, explore approaches to increasing awareness of Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) in the river and watershed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult with interagency HABs team to establish monitoring frequency and messaging Coordinate messaging via email and social media channels Create public HABs page and/or dashboard on website

Objective 3

Collaborate with federal partners on issues related to ecological health and biodiversity in the watershed.

Partners and managing agencies have expressed an interest in coordinating on multiple projects relevant to protecting and enhancing ecological health and biodiversity in the watershed. Potential projects include exploring salmonid reintroduction to the Merced River, monitoring effects of recreational trail use on biological resources beyond Yosemite's borders, monitoring invasive species like yellow starthistle and non-native bullfrogs, monitoring water quality changes related to climate change, habitat degradation and dam operation. In addition, volunteer opportunities exist related to restoration efforts that support biological diversity and ecological function like planting native species in previously degraded habitats.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 3a Collaborate with federal agencies and NGOs aligned with the Merced River Partners group regarding biological/species monitoring and reintroduction efforts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a Memorandum of Understanding regarding studying return of salmonids to Merced River
<p>Strat. 3b Consult with NPS regarding annual restoration and monitoring goals as called for in the Merced River Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a quarterly meeting to determine where the Watershed Council may play a role and potential threats within watershed
<p>Strat. 3c Consult with USFS and BLM regarding river protection goals within their management sections of the Merced Wild and Scenic River</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish regular communication to understand activities within the watershed and determine where Watershed Council may play a role to identify and address potential threats within watershed

Objective 4

Convene agency partners and stakeholders in discussions related to visitor use management in the river corridor and watershed.

Increasing visitation in Yosemite National Park and the advent of a visitor use reservation system (piloted in 2020-2022 and 2024) may have radiating effects on the Merced River downstream of the park. Opportunities exist for the Watershed Council to convene partners in matters related to understanding and problem solve matters related to visitor use management.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 4a Participate in the National Park Service's Visitor Access Management Plan EIS process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend all public meetings Contribute organization comments in response to emerging plans Promote the opportunity to comment within Watershed Council communication channels (email, social media, etc.)
<p>Strat. 4b Promote responsible recreation within the Merced River watershed and serve as a community clearinghouse for not only potential emerging impacts but what is special and unique</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post a database of projects and activities taking place within the watershed and river corridor on the organization website Seek community input on issues, impacts, and potential threats within the watershed Seek ongoing community input on the activities and qualities that are most enjoyable within the watershed Create an Eyes on the River portal to share emerging issues and create a process for administering and responding to community feedback
<p>Strat. 4c Convene NPS, BLM, USFS in discussions about visitor use within the 122 miles of the Merced Wild & Scenic river corridor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create avenues for agency collaboration to discuss visitor use issues within the river corridor and watershed

Objective 5

Establish an education and awareness campaign of issues facing the river and watershed.

As a pillar of the Watershed Council's mission, the organization will seek opportunities to educate the public and increase awareness of the unique values of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed—as well as its connectivity to the lower portions of the watershed (downstream of the Wild and Scenic River corridor). Interpretive signage in the river segments outside of Yosemite National Park are desperately needed. Messages in multiple languages that help all visitors to the river feel welcome and enjoy appropriate recreation that inspires stewardship is a priority. Helping people learn how to recreate responsibly and act as champions and stewards of the river and watershed should be a central activity.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 5a Maintain, improve, and update the Watershed Council website. Increase website visitors and become the go-to, trusted portal for information related to Merced Wild and Scenic River and its watershed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the use of the website by 15% annually • Expand the reference library by 10% annually • Improve ease of access through consistent style, intuitive software, and elimination of jargon
<p>Strat. 5b Implement the CalWild information and educational signage plan for the Highway 140 corridor, incorporating messaging in multiple languages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult with agency leadership and community to prioritize the types of signs needed as outlined in the sign plan • Target and secure funding sources • Install 5-10 signs within the Highway 140 corridor • Strengthen partnerships with affinity groups to ensure signage serves diverse communities
<p>Strat. 5c Create collateral for use at public events that will engage, educate, and inspire stewardship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publish organizational brochures • Publish an interactive map and guide to the watershed

Objective 5

Establish an education and awareness campaign on issues facing the river and watershed.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 5d Establish a communication plan that identifies and reaches new audiences while growing connection to and involvement in the organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish calendar of monthly email communication • Target quarterly news releases highlighting organizational activities/ accomplishments • Increase social media presence through three posts per week • Expand social media followers by 35% per year
<p>Strat. 5e Re-establish educational outreach to educational institutions locally and within the wider Merced River watershed (including the lower river)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit educational outreach strategies previously implemented by the organization • Consult with local school districts and community organizations (e.g., Sierra Foothill Conservancy, Mariposa Arts Council) to determine watershed educational outreach program, including field trips to study and explore the river • Connect with UC Merced, community colleges, and other institutions of higher learning to explore potential for collaboration • Establish education budget and fundraising targets
<p>Strat. 5f Create venues for education, information-sharing, and artistic expression related to the Merced River and its watershed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-institute a quarterly Speaker Series to highlight informative and inspiring topics related to the Merced River and its watershed • Collaborate with mission-aligned organizations on expert-led river/ watershed walks and talks

Objective 6

Establish a strong volunteer base of river/watershed stewards.

When asked if the Watershed Council was still needed in the community, members of the public—along with federal partners and tribal representatives—responded with a resounding YES. The community voiced a strong interest in maintaining healthy ecosystems and a trash-free watershed. When asked how the Watershed Council could assist federal partners, all three agencies expressed a desire for the Watershed Council to grow its volunteer base in order to create a ready stewardship force to support them in caring for the river and watershed.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 6a Building on past successes, the Watershed Council will reinvigorate its volunteer base and engage volunteers in diverse activities to promote stewardship of the river and watershed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct at least 10 volunteer activities or events annually • Host an annual event (e.g., Wild and Scenic Film Festival) to engage potential supporters • Increase volunteer involvement by 10% annually
<p>Strat. 6b Increase our own understanding of tribal history in the watershed, solicit current tribal perspectives on watershed issues, improve allyship, and solicit greater tribal engagement on issues of mutual interest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage new audiences and communities through existing partnerships • Expand representation of diverse communities by 25% • Increase outreach to K-12 students to build pipeline of youth volunteers on watershed events and projects • Increase direct experience of scholarship applicants with watershed conservation efforts
<p>Strat. 6c Actively collaborate and invite the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation to support stewardship efforts within the river corridor and watershed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite involvement and participation from Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation
<p>Strat. 6d Provide an annual scholarship to a Mariposa County High School outgoing senior who is pursuing a field of study related to environmental science, resource management, or furthering understanding of the natural world through creative pursuits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise funds to provide 1-2 scholarships per year

Objective 7

Grow the capacity and sustainability of the organization.

The Upper Merced River Watershed Council is a valuable asset to the community. To become the powerhouse that it once was in advocating for the watershed, additional capacity building is needed. Ten years of functioning only by way of limited volunteer time is not enough to sustain the organization. Previous grants proved that with a modest amount of funding, the organization can act on its mission and engage the community in stewardship of the river and watershed. In addition, comments from multiple sectors suggested a name change as an integral part of the rebranding process.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 7a Determine priorities and scale the organization accordingly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board of Directors reviews activities quarterly to ensure consistency with stated objectives and priority actions
<p>Strat. 7b Maintain and strengthen UMRWC visibility at public forums and as a conduit of community stewardship of the Merced River</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend partner and public meetings as they relate to issues pertaining to the Merced River and its watershed • Contribute organization comments in response to agency plans with potential watershed implications or impacts. • Promote the opportunity to comment within Watershed Council communication channels (email, social media, etc.) • Participate in community events and opportunities that promote education, stewardship, and advocacy of the Merced River and its watershed
<p>Strat. 7c Define the organizational staffing structure and resources needed to execute the Watershed Work Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish position descriptions to define roles and responsibilities • Establish organization chart that lays out structure for staffing and board of directors • Determine annual work plan and resources needed, including funding targets • Identify and populate key subcommittees and/or board members/volunteers to execute key priorities

Objective 7

Grow the capacity and sustainability of the organization.

Strategies	Actions
<p>Strat. 7d Secure funding to enable the organization to hire staff—especially leadership—to activate the Watershed Work Plan and grow the sustainability of the organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and apply for grant funding to execute staffing plan and/or key projects that can support (individually or in concert) staffing plan • Consult with partners on potential opportunities for resource sharing and initiative alignment/collaboration
<p>Strat. 7e Develop a fundraising plan to increase donations, sponsorships, and scholarships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine 5-year plan for growth • Leverage participation in community events to grow fundraising • Leverage specific initiatives or projects as an opportunity to garner grant solicitations • Conduct bi-annual fundraising appeals • Encourage donations through event registration
<p>Strat. 7f Build a strong, functioning Board of Directors to guide execution of the Watershed Work Plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow to and maintain Board at 10 directors, increase geographic and demographic diversity and complementary expertise and talents • Develop tools for recruitment and onboarding • Establish a committee structure • Re-examine bylaws to determine board roles • Continue to consult with other nonprofits on successful board governance
<p>Strat. 7g Define the operational model needed to become an organization that can withstand and weather future shifts in grant funding priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore the past membership model and determine its efficacy for current organizational structure • Determine a financial model that provides a support portfolio resilient to economic downturns, state and federal funding volatility, and increases proportion of private funding

UPPER MERCED RIVER WATERSHED COUNCIL
2024 - 2028 WATERSHED WORK PLAN

Version 1.3 | March 2024

