

**Final**

**AMERICAN RIVER  
National Recreation Area  
Feasibility Study**

**September 1990**

**U.S. Department of the Interior**  
Bureau of Land Management  
California State Office  
2800 Cottage Way  
Sacramento, CA 95825

# Executive Summary

## American River National Recreation Area Study

### Introduction

In 1989, Congress directed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to conduct a one-year study on the feasibility of designating a National Recreation Area (NRA) on the American River in California.

To accomplish this objective, BLM began contacting as many interested or affected groups, agencies, and individuals as possible. Through these and other sources, all available data were gathered on the area, its managing agencies, its resources, and its uses. A Steering Committee and Executive Committee, composed of elected officials, agencies, and others knowledgeable about the area, helped to provide BLM with important information and also served as a "sounding board" during the study preparation.

Four public hearings were held, and more than 9,000 responses were generated during the public participation stage. A summary of these comments is included later in this report, and references to changes made in the draft as a result of this public input are found throughout the study.

BLM has now completed the job it was assigned and is transmitting this final study to Congress. Any subsequent questions or comments may be addressed to the State Director, BLM, California State Office, 2800 Cottage Way, Sacramento, CA 95825, telephone (916) 978-4746.

### National Recreation Areas

Before summarizing the purpose, findings, and study conclusions, it may be helpful to describe what an NRA designation means. According to a 1988 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, Congress began designating NRAs in 1964, even though they had been administratively established by federal land management agencies since 1936. Today, there are 34 designated NRAs across the country, including three in California: Whiskeytown-Shasta-Trinity NRA, Golden Gate NRA, and Santa Monica Mountains NRA.

NRAs range from areas where the primary focus is high-density recreation use to areas where resource protection is the primary management focus. How-

ever, CRS notes, "Each Act designating an NRA is unique, tailored to the characteristics of the area, the general management philosophy of the administering agency, and the determinations of the Congress as to what other activities (and their extent) may be allowed."

### Purpose of the Study

Congressional direction on the purpose of the American River study was clearly stated in House Report 101-120 that accompanied Public Law 101-121. BLM was to prepare a study "for the purpose of determining the feasibility and desirability of designating a National Recreation Area (NRA) within the American River watershed in association with a flood control or multi-purpose dam located at or near the site of the Auburn Dam."

The House Report language expanded on that direction by specifying four key points:

- the study "shall assume the potential floodability of the NRA as a result of the construction of a multi-purpose dam or the eventual enlargement of a facility built primarily or exclusively for flood control in the near term;"
- the study "shall include the 42,000 acres designated as the total property to be taken by the original Auburn Dam on the North Fork of the American River;"
- the study "may include additional lands contiguous to the 42,000 acres, upstream to Euchre Bar within the U.S. Forest Service, and along the South Fork of the American River from Salmon Falls bridge on Folsom Lake to Chili Bar;"
- the study "shall define the best relationship between the NRA and the existing Nimbus/Folsom complex and the Lower American River."

During the public comment period, concern was raised among some elected officials in the area that an NRA designation would preclude the construction of a multi-purpose dam at Auburn. To address this concern and further clarify the study's purpose, the primary sponsors of the study, Congressmen Vic Fazio and Robert Matsui, issued a letter dated July 16, 1990 stating, "...we will not act or support Congressional action on an NRA unless it is in the context of Sacramento's entire flood control program. The NRA will not go first."

BLM has closely adhered to the study guidelines set by Congress, and has limited its report to addressing the feasibility of the American River as an NRA. BLM does

not make a recommendation on the desirability of such a designation. With no public consensus on the desirability issue, it is clearly a question for Congress, working with the various agencies, elected officials, and the public to decide.

During the course of this study, BLM was fortunate to receive assistance and information from the several agencies involved in managing portions of the American River, including county, state, and other federal entities. All are managing their portions to benefit the public and the resources. However, it is BLM's observation that more coordination among these agencies would provide even greater benefits. This coordinated, interagency approach to land management has been very successful in other parts of the State toward enhancing resource values. BLM recommends such an approach be taken on the American River, regardless of the outcome of this study.

## Criteria for Designation of National Recreation Areas

The study describes in detail the criteria that have been used in the past by agencies evaluating the suitability of an area for NRA designation. The most frequently used and consistent criteria were developed by the National Park Service in 1978 and were used in this American River study. These are:

1. "National Recreation Areas should be spacious areas containing outstanding natural and/or cultural features and providing significant recreation opportunities.
2. "National Recreation Areas should be located and designed to achieve comparatively heavy recreation use and should usually be located where they can contribute significantly to the recreation needs of urban populations.
3. "National Recreation Areas should provide recreation opportunities significant enough to assure national, as well as regional visitation.
4. "The scale of investment, development, and operational responsibility should be sufficiently high to require either direct Federal involvement or substantial Federal participation to assure optimum public benefit."

## Public Involvement

BLM widely distributed the draft study for public comment. Three public hearings were planned (Auburn, Sacramento, Placerville) and a fourth was

added in Shingle Springs because of an overflow crowd at the Placerville hearing. All hearings were transcribed and a copy of the transcripts are transmitted to Congress with this study. Written comments were also received and are available for public review at the BLM's office in Folsom.

BLM received a total of 9,400 responses (i.e. letters, testimony, postcards, petitions, etc.) and tallied more than 15,000 comments from these responses on the study. A summary of these responses is included in Chapter 7 and excerpts from detailed comments are included in Appendix A.

The process used, called content analysis, aims at objectively describing the responses for use by the decision makers. No "weight" is assigned to any one input; all responses are considered equal. That is, a resolution from a county board of supervisors is equal to one response, as is a postcard from an organized campaign. Therefore, the numbers are only an indicator of the level of response; readers are advised to carefully examine the written as well as tabular information to see the broad spectrum of public comments and judge for themselves the importance of a particular comment. BLM has facilitated this review by capturing as many names, agencies, groups, etc. as well verbatim quotations and portraying them in the text of Chapter 7.

As evidence of the significance of the dam alternative issue and the NRA desirability issues, 97 percent (14,772) of the comments addressed these topics. Only three percent (295) of the comments specifically addressed BLM's study on the feasibility of the area to be designated an NRA. However, all these comments were carefully analyzed for Congress' use. The comments that specifically addressed the study were used as much as possible in preparing this final version and references to these comments are shown throughout the report.

## Study Findings and Conclusions

On the upper three segments, (North Fork Wild River, Auburn Project, South Fork) the BLM's study findings indicate that they fully meet all the NRA eligibility criteria. BLM's direction from Congress was to study and define their best relationship to the lower two segments (Folsom Lake State Recreation Area and the American River Parkway.)

The upper three segments are sufficiently spacious, have an abundance of outstanding natural and cultural features, and offer a wide variety of recreational opportunities. They lie within and adjacent to a fast-

growing metropolitan area of more than a million people and within a short drive of many more millions. They provide the types of recreation most in demand by local residents, while at the same time offering qualities to attract visitors from a distance. They have the potential to provide even more public benefits under an NRA designation.

Following the established NRA criteria, the combination of these three segments possesses all the qualities envisioned by the federal government in the NRA concept, perhaps conforming even more closely than many already established NRAs.

If Congress were to add the Folsom Lake SRA and the American River Parkway to the potential NRA, these segments would significantly enhance the American River's eligibility as an NRA for all the established criteria.

Finally, the BLM was unable to draw any conclusions on the issue of desirability. The public comments received clearly show a wide divergence of opinion on whether the affected agencies, elected officials, and public groups favor such a designation. It is also evident that the various opinions are heavily influenced by the flood control or dam debate ongoing in the area during preparation of this study. If the issue of a dam alternative were resolved, it is possible a public consensus on an NRA could be reached or at least public opinions could be clarified on the NRA issue alone. Since this situation did not exist during the preparation of this study, the BLM cannot make a sound recommendation on the issue of desirability and feels that Congress, once the dam issue is resolved, should work with the federal, state, and local agencies and groups involved to reach a decision.