

# **Merced River**

*CA-040-203*



MERCED RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA (WSA)

(CA-040-203)

1. THE STUDY AREA — 13,140 acres

The Merced River WSA is located in central Merced County. It is located in the Merced River Canyon between Bagby and Briceburg, approximately eight miles north of the town of Mariposa, California. The WSA includes 12,959 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands and 181 of private inholdings totaling 13,140 acres (see Map 1 and Table 1).

The WSA is bounded to the west and south by private land and electrical power transmission lines, on the east by the old Yosemite railroad grade, private land, a fire break along the ridge top, and down an unnamed drainage to the north fork of the Merced River, and on the north by the north fork of the Merced River to the Schilling Ranch Road river crossing, along the Schilling Ranch Road and private property boundaries.

The WSA is within the Merced River Canyon and includes portions of the north fork of the Merced River, and numerous other small canyons. Elevations vary from approximately 850 to 3,400 feet above sea level. The vegetation of the unit is primarily chemise with some pines and oak occurring along the major drainages. Manzanita, other low shrubs and annuals also occur at varying densities throughout the unit. There are two special designations within the area. One is the Limestone Salamander Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), and the other is a Congressionally mandated study of the area to include the Merced River in the Wild and Scenic River System.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). Suitability recommendations were analyzed in the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) for the Central California Study Areas. A summary of the area's wilderness values was included in the Final EIS. Two different suitability recommendations were analyzed in the EIS; all wilderness and no wilderness.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE — 0 acres recommended for wilderness  
12,959 BLM acres recommended for non wilderness

No wilderness is the recommendation for this WSA. The entire acreage in the WSA is released for uses other than wilderness.

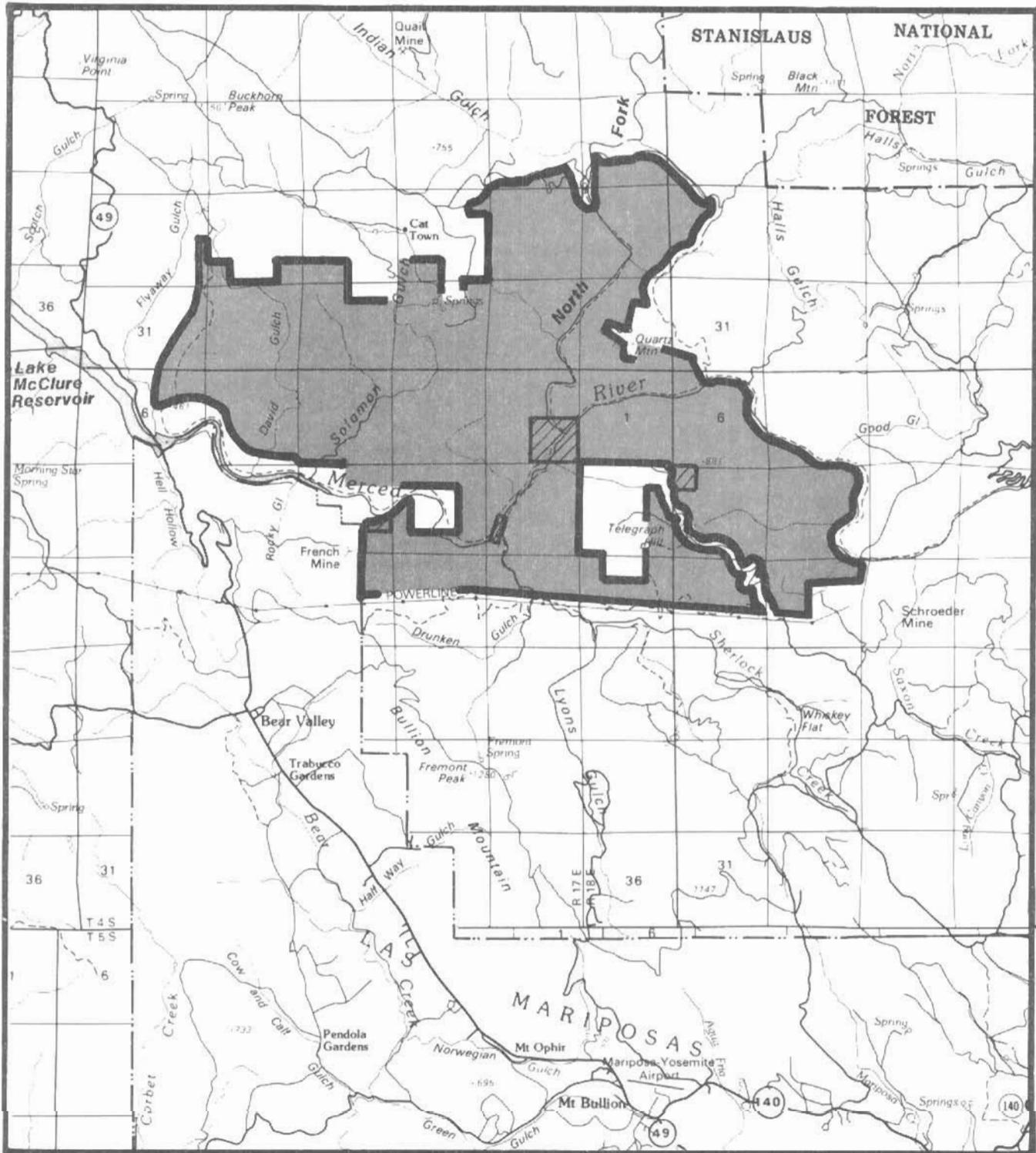
The all-wilderness alternative is considered to be the environmentally preferred alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The no-wilderness alternative will be implemented in a manner which will use all practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

The WSA is recommended nonsuitable for the following reasons: the high mineral potential of the area, the large number of mining claims within the WSA (it is estimated that at least 60 percent of these placer claims could be deemed valid), are the presence of large tracts of private inholdings which have a high potential for development and access needs. Additionally, the WSA has low wilderness values and because of its irregular shape and high public demand for use-effective management of the area as wilderness would be difficult.

The WSA lends itself to other resource uses. Under the Bureau's recommendation this area will remain open for mineral exploration and development due to the high potential for the occurrence of locatable minerals in the entire WSA as is evidenced by the large number of placer claims present throughout the WSA.

The private inholdings, which have potential for development, and the mining claims with a high potential for valid existing rights (estimated to be 60 percent of all placer claims present), will require motorized access. Development of mining claims which are found to have valid existing rights could impair the area's wilderness values with or without wilderness designation. The area's trails and firebreaks which total approximately seven miles will continue to be used.

The irregular shape combined with a lack of topographical or cultural features to delineate the boundaries would make managing the area as wilderness difficult. Extensive signing, and in specific cases, fencing of the boundaries would be necessary. The cherrystemmed road running along the ridgeline of Telegraph Hill detracts from the natural character of the area.

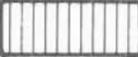


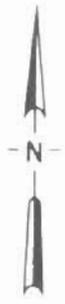
T3S  
T4S

T4S  
T5S

R 16 E | R17E

R17E | R18E

- |   |      |   |   |              |
|---|------|---|---|--------------|
|  | NONE | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS                  |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  |      | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS               |  | STATE        |
|  |      | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE      |



**Merced River  
Proposal  
MAP-1**



040-203  
JUNE, 1988

TABLE 1 - Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area

<u>Within Wilderness Study Area</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	12,959
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		181
Total		<u>13,140</u>
<u>Within the Recommended Wilderness Study Boundary</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(within WSA)	0
BLM	(outside WSA)	0
Split Estate	(within WSA)	0
Split Estate	(outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness		0
Inholdings		
State		0
Private		0
<u>Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness</u>		<u>Acres</u>
BLM	(surface and subsurface)	12,959
Split Estate	(BLM surface only)	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness		<u>12,959</u>

3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Wilderness Characteristics

1. Naturalness: The Merced River WSA generally appears to have been affected by the forces of nature with human influences unnoticeable for the most part. An abandoned railroad grade parallels the Merced River through the center of the WSA. Other abandoned projects occurring in the canyon include a diversion dam, a powerhouse foundation and old mining developments located throughout the WSA. All of these projects have been abandoned and the area can be returned to substantially natural condition by hand labor and/or natural processes. Numerous firebreaks and ways are located throughout the WSA but are, for the most part, substantially unnoticeable.

2. Solitude: The area's topographic variation and dense vegetation combine to form outstanding opportunities for solitude.

This WSA is periodically overflowed by military aircraft as part of the national defense mission taking place in approved military operating areas and flight corridors. The visual intrusions and associated noise create periodic temporary effects on solitude which are deemed necessary and acceptable as a part of the defense preparedness of the nation.

3. Primitive and unconfined recreation: Outstanding opportunities for water-related primitive and unconfined types of recreation can be found along the Merced River. Some unmaintained foot trails currently exist in the unit and provide opportunities for hiking and backpacking. Dense, low-lying vegetation covers the area restricting human movement and limiting opportunities for primitive or unconfined recreation.
4. Special features: The Merced River flows for four miles through the WSA and offers outstanding opportunities for water-related activities such as whitewater rafting.

B. Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

1. Assessing the diversity of natural systems and features as represented by ecosystems: This WSA contains 12,959 acres of the Sierran Forest/Chaparral ecosystem. The Merced River WSA would not increase the diversity of the types of ecosystems represented in the NWPS.

Table 2 - Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification Domain/Province/PNV	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>NATIONWIDE</u>				
Sierran Forest/ Chaparral	8	68,312	1	3,588
<u>CALIFORNIA</u>				
Sierran Forest/ Chaparral	8	68,312	1	3,588

2. Expanding the opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation within a day's driving time (five hours) of major population centers: The WSA is within a five-hour drive of 14 major population centers. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population centers.

Table 3 - Wilderness Opportunities for Residents of Major Population Centers

Population Centers	NWPS areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
<u>California</u>				
Bakersfield	32	4,071,358	128	3,998,548
Fresno	35	4,048,852	28	460,790
Merced	33	3,957,550	25	348,753
Modesto	36	4,126,963	81	1,722,326
Sacramento	46	5,001,817	87	2,479,541
Salinas-Seaside-Monterey	24	3,676,896	45	644,415
San Francisco-Oakland	39	4,473,002	39	565,614
San Jose	27	3,765,512	29	352,748
Santa Cruz	27	3,765,512	32	407,890
Santa Rosa-Petaluma	10	888,579	12	134,167
Stockton	35	4,061,833	46	601,496
Vallejo-Napa-Fairfield	44	4,832,667	74	2,100,862
Visalia-Tulare-Porterville	34	4,431,635	61	1,681,921
Yuba City	44	4,951,805	85	2,459,500

3. Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas:  
 There are no other BLM WSAs within 50 air miles of the Merced River WSA. The Yosemite National Park Wilderness is 20 miles to the East. The Emigrant Wilderness Area in Stanislaus National Forest is 40 miles to the northeast and the Ansel Adams Wilderness Area is 40 miles southeast in the Sierra National Forest.

C. Manageability

The Merced River WSA is manageable as wilderness, but only with difficulty. Manageability problems include the overall irregular shape with sectional (rather than topographic or cultural features) boundaries, leading to difficult recognition on the ground. Frequent signing, detailed maps and intensive patrolling along various segments of the border could be required to insure the integrity of the unit. An estimated 60% of the placer claims could have valid existing rights and the potential for full development. Development of mining claims which are found to have valid existing rights could impair the area's wilderness values with or without wilderness designation. Private and state inholdings, including Telegraph Hill, have some potential for incompatible development. The cherry-stemmed road leading to the top of Telegraph Hill, while providing access to the unit, also opens up parts of the area to the vulnerability of off-road vehicle trespass within topographic limitations.

Military overflights in this WSA must be considered to maintain the integrity of the existing and future national defense mission as well as the wilderness resource.

D. Energy and Mineral Resource Values

1. Summary of information known at the time of the preliminary suitability recommendations: The Merced River WSA is in the Merced River Geology-Energy Minerals (G-E-M) Resource Area. A G-E-M report was written in March 1982. This report was updated in 1986. The data contained in these reports was used in the Wilderness Recommendations Central California Study Areas Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in 1987. The EIS stated that the WSA has high potential for jade, placer gold and lode gold.

The 1982 G-E-M report shows that nearly every drainage in the WSA has been mined for placer gold. Placer mining (mostly suction dredging) continues today on mining claims on the Merced River, north fork of the Merced River, Sherlock Creek, and Solomon Gulch. During the gold rush period, the entire length of David Gulch was heavily mined. Placer gold has been produced from the active bed of rivers and creeks, from high bench gravels, well above the active watercourses, and from ground sluicing the surface of lode mines. The high bench gravels were worked by hydraulic mining as in the case of the Coleman Mine on the north fork of the Merced River and underground drifting which occurred in the placers along Sherlock Creek.

The 1986 G-E-M report states that a portion of the Mother Lode vein system cuts the western edge of the WSA. There are eight jade mines or prospects in this area which were primarily developed during the 1960s. There is also a talc prospect and possibly gold prospects (see: Evans and Bowen, 1977, California Division of Mines and Geology Map Sheet 36).

Lode gold mining has occurred in many places in the WSA. The Cat Town Mining District which lies almost entirely within the WSA has yielded a minimum of 3,300 ounces of gold (\$1.5 million at \$450/oz.). The Quartz Mountain is immediately east of the WSA boundary. It produced about 87,000 ounces of gold (approximately \$40 million at \$450/oz.). In the southeast corner of the WSA is the extension of the French Mine which produced around 20,000 ounces of gold (approximately \$9 million at \$450/oz.). Adjacent to the southeast, the Shroeder mine produced about 15,000 ounces of gold (approximately \$6.8 million at \$450/oz.). Often the quartz veins developed by these mines extend into the WSA. Mines and claims in the WSA are located

on the same trends developed by previously productive mines that are within and outside of the WSA. At the time of the EIS (1987) BLM records identified 140 unpatented placer claims and 69 unpatented lode claims in the WSA.

2. Summary of significant new mineral resource data collected since the suitability recommendation, which should be considered in the final recommendation: No U.S. Geologic Survey (USGS) or U.S. Bureau of Mines (BOM) mineral surveys were conducted in the WSA. C.T. Herzig (1985, Master's Thesis, State University of New York, Stony Brook) completed a thorough study of the Jurassic rocks within the WSA. This is the most complete study of geology in this area to date. Herzig identified Jurassic hypabassal intrusions which were not previously identified. The Odell Mine known for rich pockets of free gold, occurs along a contact with this rock.

There exists a total of 17 placer plans of operation most of which are small-scale. There were eight plans on the Merced River, six on the north fork, one on Solomon Gulch and two on Sherlock Creek. Two lode plans of operation have been received. In addition to these, there are two unpatented tunnel sites in the unsuitable part of the WSA. This new data supports the EIS findings that the entire WSA has high potential for gold. The portion of the WSA within the Mother Lode vein system has a high potential for jade.

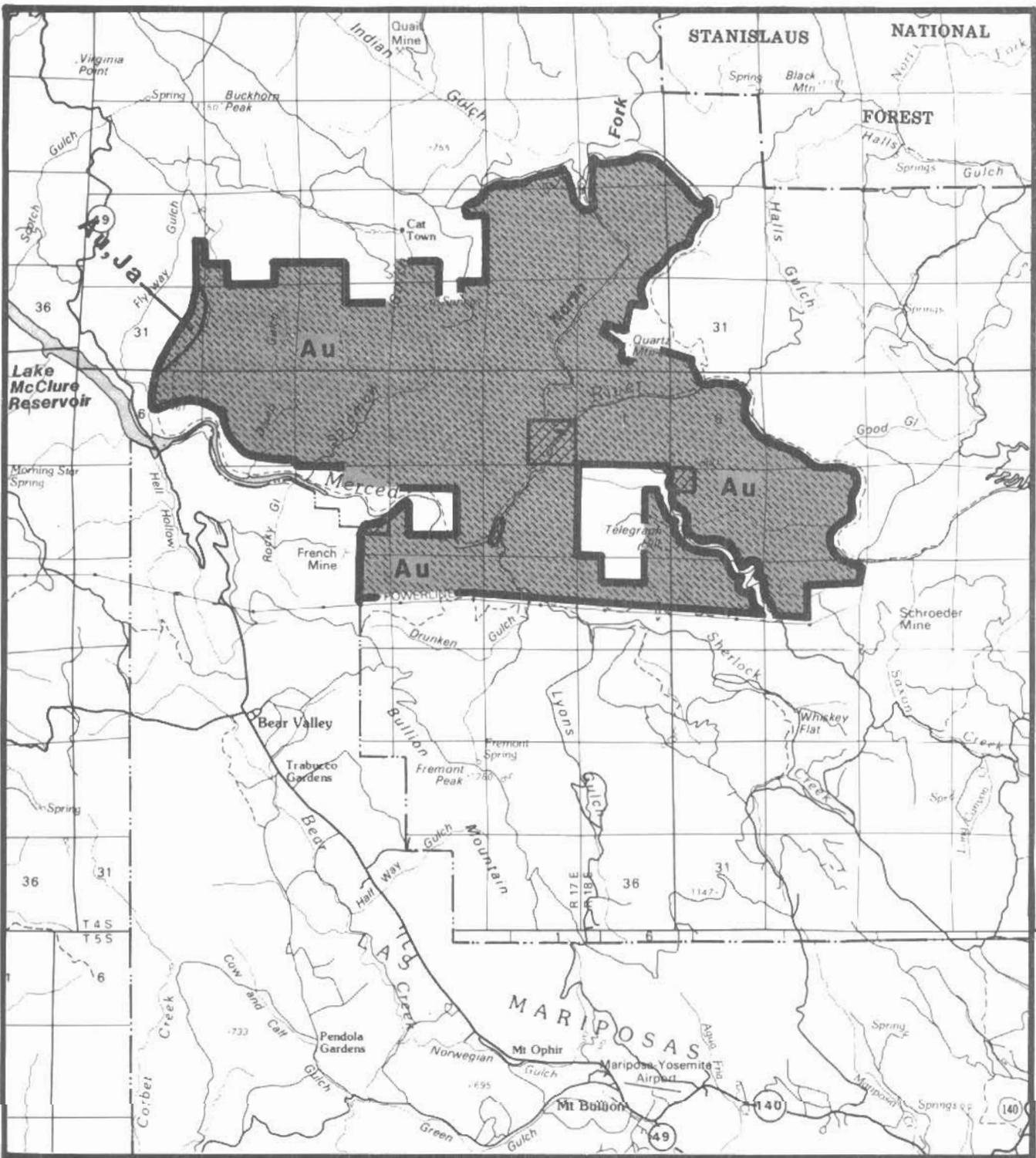
Interest in mineral exploration is further indicated by the following BLM mineral records dated March 25, 1988:

Table 4 - Mining Claims

TYPE	NO.			ACRES		
	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL	SUITABLE	NONSUIT.	TOTAL
Mining Claims						
Lode	0	57	57	0	1140	1140
Placer	0	102	102	0	4080	4080
Mill Sites	0	7	7	0	35	35
Total	0	166	166	0	5255	5255

E. Impacts on Resources

The following table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all alternatives considered including designation or non designation of the entire area as wilderness. (For a full explanation of this summary, refer to the Central California Study Areas - Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement.)



T3S  
T4S

T4S  
T5S

R 16  
E

R 17E

R 17E | R 18E

- NONE Recommended for Wilderness
- Recommended for Non Wilderness
- Land outside WSA Recommended for Wilderness
- Split Estate
- State
- Private

- Explanation**
- High Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
  - Moderate Potential for the Occurrence of Energy and/or Non-energy Minerals
  - M** Moderate Mineral Potential Location in a High Mineral Potential Area
  - H** High Mineral Potential Location in a Moderate Mineral Potential Area

- Commodity Symbols**
- Au** Gold
  - Ja** Jade



**Merced River  
Mineral Resource Potential**



**Map-2  
040-203**

Table 5 - Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative

ISSUE-RELATED RESOURCES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impact on Wilderness Values	There will be a moderate adverse impact on the area's wilderness values over approximately 15 to 20 percent of the WSA as a result of continued ORV use and the exploration and development of the WSA's placer and lode claims.	There would be a moderate adverse impact on the area's wilderness values over approximately 8 to 10 percent of the WSA as a result of the exploration and development of 60 percent of the placer gold claims and 20 percent of the lode jade and gold claims.
Impact on Recreational ORV Use	Recreational ORV use will be slightly enhanced as a result of the road improvements associated with the exploration and development of the area's mineral resources. The levels of recreational ORV use will increase from 2,500-3,000 visitor days per year to nearly 4,000 visitor days.	Recreation ORV use would be foregone, eliminating the 2,500-3,000 visitor days estimated to occur annually within the WSA. The impact would be moderate, however, because of the availability of similar opportunities for motorized recreational use on lands proximate to the WSA.
Impact on the Preservation of Archaeological Resources	The area's archaeological resources will be slightly impacted as a result of the surface disturbance from continued mining activity and theft and vandalism associated with increased motorized and pedestrian use.	Impacts would be the same as for the Proposed Action. Motorized vehicles would be prohibited eliminating the 2,500-3,000 visitor days estimated to occur annually, negligibly benefiting these resources.
Impact on Federally Listed Candidate Species	There will be no impact to the habitat of the area's federally listed candidate species--the Limestone salamander.	Impacts would be the same as for the Proposed Action.
Impact on Mineral Exploration and Development	There will be no impact on mineral exploration and development.	Less than half of the area's 209 lode and placer claims would be explored/developed. Future mining activity would be foregone.

F. Local Social and Economic Considerations

No local social or economic considerations were identified in the Final EIS. Therefore, no further discussion of this topic will occur in this document.

G. Summary of WSA - Specific Public Comments

A few comments relating to this WSA were received during the wilderness inventory phase. Some comments agreed with the WSA's boundary as described by BLM, while other comments disagreed with the suggested boundary adjustments along various roads and/or mining disturbances. In addition, recommendations to completely drop the WSA from consideration as wilderness were received.

During the study phase, a public hearing was held in Fresno, California. During the public hearing and the comment period, a total of 52 comments were received, both oral and written, related specifically to this unit. Ten comments supported the Bureau's no wilderness alternative. Forty-two comments supported the all wilderness alternative.

The County of Mariposa concurred with BLM's no-wilderness recommendation. The Resources Agency of the State of California recommended the WSA as suitable for designation as wilderness because of its outstanding wilderness features and primitive river canyon opportunities. No comments relating to this WSA were received from Federal agencies.

