

**Mother Lode Field Office  
Merced River Recreation Area  
Expanded Fees for Recreation Sites and Services**

# **Merced River Recreation Area Business Plan**

Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management

Mother Lode Field Office  
5152 Hillside Circle El Dorado Hills, CA 95762  
February 2023



*Merced River at Briceburg*

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**BLM Signatory Page**

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**Signatures for Approving Business Plan**

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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**Reviewed By:**

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**State Director**

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**Date**



## 1. Executive Summary

This business plan was prepared pursuant to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) of 2004, (P.L. 108-447) and BLM recreation fee program policy. It establishes future management goals and priorities for the Mother Lode Field Office's recreation fee program. This business plan outlines a proposed fee change for campgrounds in the Merced River Recreation Area, presents historical visitation and revenue, provides a fair market value analysis, and shows the need to increase fee revenue to pay for operating costs. Consistent with FLREA, the intent of this business plan is not to maximize fee revenue but to help protect natural resources, provide for public health and safety, and facilitate access to public lands and related waters. Fees are a way of ensuring that those who actively use recreation opportunities make a greater, but reasonable, contribution toward protecting and enhancing those opportunities than those who do not utilize recreational opportunities.

The Mother Lode Field Office Recreation Program includes active management of expanded and standard amenity recreation sites within the Merced River Recreation Area including McCabe Flat Campground, Willow Placer Campground, Railroad Flat Campground, Briceburg Day Use Area and Visitors Center, and Cable Rock Day Use Area. This business plan will only discuss the fee increases at the McCabe Flat, Willow Placer and Railroad Flat Campgrounds. The campgrounds meet the expanded amenity parameters as defined in FLREA because the recreation areas provide five or more amenities, including: tent or trailer spaces, refuse containers, toilet facilities, reasonable visitor protection, food storage and simple devices for containing a campfire. The amenity for drinking water is provided at the start of Briceburg Road (Old Yosemite Valley Railroad Grade); the entrance road to the campgrounds. No standard amenity fees for day-use within the Merced River Recreation Area currently exist and none are proposed at this time.



*Briceburg Day Use Area Entrance*

Table 1: Proposed Modified Expanded Amenity Fees

<b>Campground</b>	<b>Current Fee Structure</b>	<b>Proposed Modified Fee Structure Initial Fee Increase</b>
McCabe Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$20 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
Willow Placer Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$20 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
Railroad Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$20 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
<b>Campground</b>	<b>Current Fee Structure</b>	<b>Proposed Modified Fee Structure Second Fee Increase</b>
McCabe Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$25 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$45 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
Willow Placer Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$25 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$45 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.

Railroad Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$25 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site.
<b>Campground</b>	<b>Current Fee Structure</b>	<b>Proposed Modified Fee Structure Third Fee Increase</b>
McCabe Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$30 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$50 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
Willow Placer Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$30 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$50 per night for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site.
Railroad Flat Campground	\$10 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles.	\$30 per night for single site to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night, as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site.

All proposed fees are based on a fair market analysis of fees charged by other public agencies and private providers for similar services within the respective geographic area of each recreation site. The proposed fees would be reviewed and adjusted if needed by the Authorized Officer for a total of two additional increases beyond the proposed initial fee increase. Fee decisions would be based on multiple factors including the occupancy rate at each campground; the cost to government of operating, maintaining, and improving the campgrounds, and the impacts of dispersed camping outside of the campgrounds on the cultural and natural resource values of surrounding public lands. Fee increases are necessary to better meet the expenses of the recreation program, including maintenance and operations to prevent resource damage and provide better visitor services. When the field office decides to make reservation services or other types of e-commerce options available in the future, an expanded amenity fee for reservation services would be charged in addition to any other standard or expanded amenity fees in accordance with 16 U.S.C.





## **2. Introduction**

### **2.1. Fee and Business Plan Requirement**

This business plan outlines direction for the operation and maintenance of the Bureau of Land Management, Mother Lode Field Office campgrounds and the associated Recreation Use Permit (RUP) program. The plan conforms to state and national direction for recreation management and is built on partnerships with local communities. This plan was prepared pursuant to the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) of December 2004 (P.L. 108-447, as amended and codified at 16 United States Code (U.S.C.) Chapter 87), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recreation fee program policy and manual (Manual 2930-Recreation Permits and Fees) and handbook (H-2930-1 Recreation Permit and Fee Administration Handbook).

FLREA provides the BLM's current authority to establish, modify, charge, and collect recreation fees at Federal recreational lands and waters. FLREA authorizes the BLM to retain locally collected recreation fees and outlines how revenues may be used for such things as facility repair, maintenance, facility enhancement directly related to public use and operating, or capital costs associated with the Recreation and Visitor Services program. Under FLREA, a Standard Amenity fee and an Expanded Amenity fee may be charged for the use of certain facilities or services, which include developed day-use sites and campgrounds. The developed recreational sites must meet the criteria defined below to charge fees. These fees are usually implemented through the issuance of a recreation use permit (RUP), or through a specific annual pass. BLM policy requires that revenue from RUPs be deposited into a separate account (pg. 2-3 (8) of H-2930-1). Doing so allows the BLM to more readily track and report collections and ensures that RUP revenue is spent at or near the site of collection.

Definitions of Expanded Amenities, defined at 16 U.S.C §6802 (f) and (g), are summarized below.

Expanded Amenity Recreation Fees cover specialised outdoor recreation sites and services including but not limited to developed campgrounds with at least a majority of the following amenities: (1) tent or trailer spaces, (2) picnic tables, (3) drinking water, (4) access roads, (5) fee collection by an employee or agent of the BLM, (6) reasonable visitor protection, (7) refuse containers, (8) toilet facilities, (9) simple devices for containing a campfire (Sec. 803.(g)(2)(A) of REA.

### **2.2. Regulatory Background**

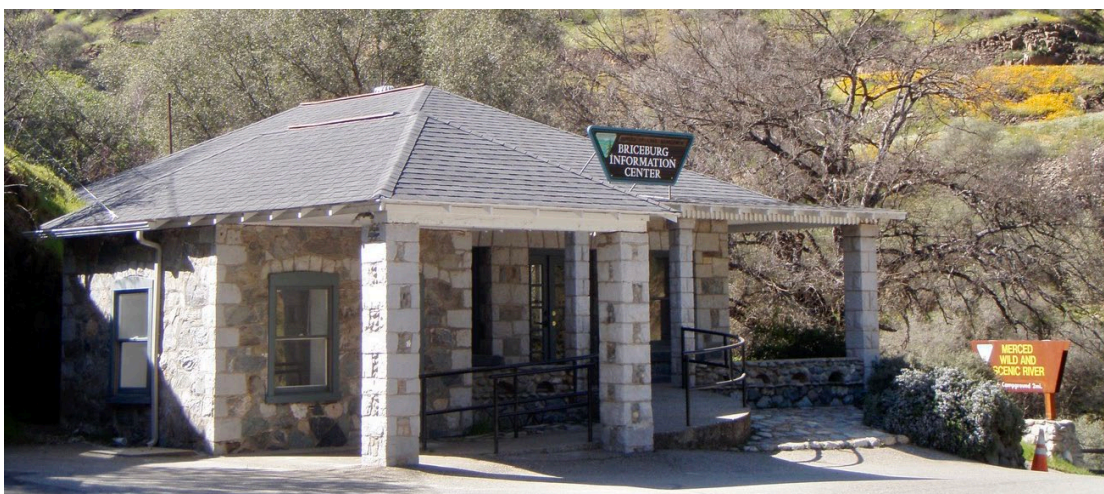
The BLM Handbook H-2930-1, Recreation Permits and Fee Administration (Rel. 2- 300, dated Nov. 17, 2014), requires each recreation fee program has an approved business plan which thoroughly discusses fees and explains how fees are consistent with the criteria set forth in FLREA. Business plans are to assist management in determining the appropriateness and level of fees, the cost of administering a fee program and the expected benefits for the public. The primary purpose of the plan is to serve as public notification of the objectives for use of recreation fee

revenues and to provide the public an opportunity to comment on these objectives. The finalized business plan guides the expenditure of collected FLREA funds and ensures public accountability. The business plan will specifically cover a description of the fee sites, proposed changes in fees to these sites, associated operating costs, planned expenditures of fee revenue, a financial analysis utilizing a regional comparative market study of fees charged for other similar recreation facilities, and the impacts of proposed fee changes. The data used to analyze and prepare this business plan was obtained through internal BLM tracking and accounting mechanisms such as the Federal Business Management System (FBMS), Recreation Management Information System (RMIS), Collections and Billing Systems (CBS), and other locally generated recreation and visitor use tracking spreadsheets.

16 U.S.C. §6802 (d) provides limitations on recreation fees including prohibitions that standard or expanded amenity recreation fees shall not be charged for: parking only, undesignated parking, or picnicking along roads or along trails, general access, low investment sites or areas, persons moving through without using the facilities or services, for camping at undeveloped sites that do not provide a minimum number of facilities or services as described above (expanded amenity recreation fee), use of overlooks or scenic pullouts, any person engaged in the conduct of official Federal, State, Tribal or local government business, special attention or extra services necessary to meet the needs of the disabled, any person under 16 years of age, outings conducted for non-commercial educational purposes by schools or bona fide academic institutions, and others.

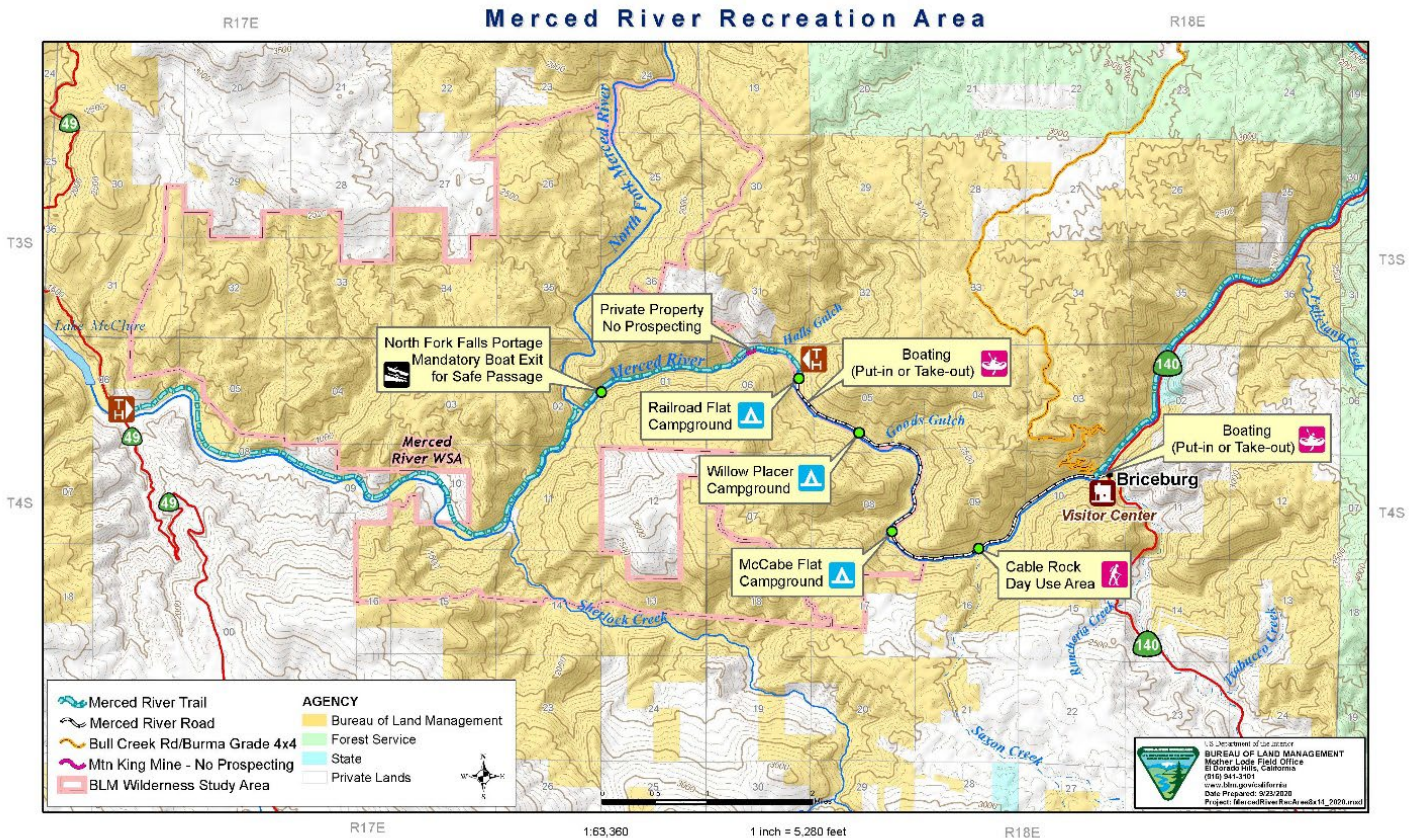
The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (Public Law 94-579) provides the BLM's general land use management authority over public lands and establishes outdoor recreation as an authorized use of those lands. Section 302(b) authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to regulate public lands uses through permits or other instruments.

This business plan has been prepared pursuant to all applicable BLM recreation fee program policies and guidance outlined in the BLM Recreation Permit and Fee Administration Handbook (H-2930-1).



*Briceburg Information Center*





Map 2. Merced River Recreation Area

### 3. Background

#### 3.1. Area Description

##### Wild and Scenic Merced River

The Merced River Recreation Management Area (RMA) is just downstream from Yosemite National Park (NP), with both Stanislaus National Forest and Sierra National Forest lands in-between. The un-dammed nationally designated Wild and Scenic Merced River originates in Yosemite National Park on the crest of the Sierra Nevada Mountains at an elevation greater than 11,000 feet. The river flows wild and undammed until it reaches McClure Reservoir, formed by the New Exchequer Dam near Merced Falls.

Access is made easy to this Wild and Scenic River via Highway 140, and the Briceburg River Road (Old Yosemite Valley Railroad Grade). Briceburg is a historical river crossing location, and the three BLM riverside campgrounds are located downstream. The Briceburg River Road is a five-mile section of the Old Yosemite Valley Railroad that provides vehicle access to the three BLM campgrounds and Merced River Trail Trailhead. Nine miles of the Merced River Trail offer

non-motorized trail access to the North Fork Merced (2.3 miles) and Bagby/Highway 49 (9 miles). The Merced River Trail (Old Yosemite Valley Railroad Grade) also continues upriver from Briceburg on the north side of the river to the town of El Portal (14 miles).

The Merced River is well known for excellent class III-IV whitewater boating during spring runoff, and family friendly class II-III floating later in the summer until it gets too low to float. Spring wildflower viewing, year-round camping, swimming, hiking, mountain biking, bird watching, fishing and recreational gold panning/prospecting are all common recreational activities within the RMA. The historical Gold Rush era town of Mariposa also attracts visitors to the area.

### **3.2.Visitor Demographics**

The Mother Lode Field Office does not collect or maintain comprehensive visitor demographic information for recreational users across the public lands it administers. Local tourism and visitation data is collected by the Yosemite Mariposa County Tourism Bureau and the National Park Service. The US Forest Service collects visitation demographic data as well. According to the National Park Service, Yosemite National Park recorded 3.3 million recreational visits to the park in 2021. Most visitors access Yosemite National Park via Hwy 140 through the BLM Merced River RMA. In a 2009 Yosemite National Park visitation survey (latest available), it found that 75% of visitors were United States (US) residents with 62% of those being from California and the rest (25%) visiting from outside of the US. According to a 2019 report done by the Yosemite Mariposa County Tourism Bureau which looked at hotel visitation within Mariposa County from the years of 2009-2019 visitation percentage results were very similar to those from the National Park. The Tourism Bureau found that between 75-80% of visitation came from within the US with 60% coming from California and the other 20-25% of visitors came from outside of the US which concurs with the National Park survey.

**Mariposa County.** According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Mariposa County in 2020 was 17,131 with a median household income (in 2020 dollars) of \$50,960.

**Tuolumne County.** According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Tuolumne County in 2020 was 55,620 with a median household income (in 2020 dollars) of \$60,509.

**Merced County.** According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Merced County in 2020 was 281,202 with a median household income (in 2020 dollars) of \$56,330.

**Stanislaus County.** According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Stanislaus County in 2020 was 552,878 with a median household income (in 2020 dollars) of \$62,873.

**Madera County.** According to the United States Census Bureau the population of Madera County in 2020 was 156,255 with a median household income (in 2020 dollars) of \$61,924.

### **3.3. Recreational Visitation**

Visitation at the Merced River RMA campgrounds primarily includes fishermen, beach goers, boaters, people visiting Yosemite NP, family get-togethers, and people seeking the leisure and relaxation offered by riverside camping. The campground is open year-round with concentrated use around the three major summer holidays of Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day weekends. Most campers stay for one to three nights; however, there is a small percentage of users that will stay for one to two weeks. Visitation also comes from the local and often underserved communities. By direct observation over more than a decade, more than 50% of overnight use comes from the California Central Valley, greater than 10% from Mariposa County, 15% Bay-area/greater CA, 15% other US States, 10% international.

### **3.4. Season of Use**

Most visitation at the campgrounds occurs between late April and early October. Visitation is largely dependent on seasonal factors such as weather or wildfires. Campground occupancy rates differ by season and day of the week but are observed to generally range between 30 and 45 percent for midweek occupancy and full for weekend occupancy during the peak summer months. The campgrounds always fill on popular three-day weekends, such as Memorial Day and 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

### **3.5. Operating Costs**

The Mother lode Field Office expends substantial resources in managing visitor use at developed recreation sites. All sites require and benefit from staff presence and visitor contacts, signage, interpretive opportunities, cleaning, trash pick-up, and maintenance. Direct costs for these services are primarily BLM employees. Costs also include services such as restroom pumping, garbage collection, hazard tree mitigation, potable water testing, vehicles, law enforcement, signage, maintenance supplies, brochures, and other interpretive materials.

#### **3.5.1. Annual Operating Costs of Recreation Sites**

The greatest operating expense is related to staff labor for visitor services and related maintenance actions. Table 2 summarizes the annual operating costs associated with the Merced River campgrounds. BLM recreation employees, and contractors ensure the cleanliness and safety of the facilities. These staff are responsible for responding to visitor inquiries, resolving disputes, fee collection, cleaning campsites, infrastructure maintenance, construction of campground amenities, and landscaping. The campgrounds are also patrolled by BLM Law Enforcement Rangers to assist with fee compliance, protect resources and facilities, and help ensure the safety of campers. Toilet cleaning, pumping and effluent disposal services are performed by staff and/or specialized contractors certified to address hazardous wastes. The cost of cleaning and maintaining the campgrounds also includes buying toilet paper, garbage bags and

cleaning supplies. Maintenance and testing of the drinking water systems is provided by BLM staff and a private lab. The Merced River Recreation Area has a successful noxious weed eradication program implemented by the local Recreation and Maintenance Staff. The program also supports the cost for government vehicles and equipment used to support patrols, maintenance work, resource and visitor use monitoring. Large projects involving campground design, construction, and road maintenance are supported by engineering staff as needed. Other annual operating costs include monitoring of visitor use, contract procurement and administration, public affairs, GIS mapping, and support functions such as providing information services to the public from the front desk of the Field Office.

*Table 2: Annual Operating Costs for the Merced River Campgrounds*

Expanded Amenity Fee Site Operating Costs per Worker Based on Allocated Time	Approximate Annual Operating Costs
Maintenance Worker	\$23,000
Park Ranger (Seasonal River Patrol)	\$15,000
Outdoor Rec Planner	\$25,000
Administrative Rec Staff	\$12,000
Law Enforcement	\$20,000
<b>Utilities &amp; Services</b>	
Garbage Service	\$7,000
Water	\$5,000
Toilet Pumping	\$10,000
<b>Materials and Supplies</b>	
Toilet Paper, Cleaning and Maintenance Supplies	\$6,500
Incidental Maintenance	\$7,000
Vehicles	\$35,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$165,500</b>

Maintenance costs at recreation sites vary year to year, and the “incidental maintenance” noted in the table applies to needs such as basic plumbing repair, basic landscaping, periodic fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, picnic table replacement, painting, broken bear box locks, and sign replacement.

### **3.5.2. Recreation Use & Fee Revenues**

Table 3 shows the visitor days as self-reported on recreation use permits and annual revenue for the past 5 years (FY 2018 through FY 2022) for the three Merced River Campgrounds. Fees collected show fluctuations in visitation, with an annual average revenue collected from campgrounds of \$21,560. Fee compliance fluctuates largely based on BLM presence.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted recreational visitation in 2020 and 2021. Campgrounds delayed opening for 3 months, but visitation increased in those years due to increased demand by people looking to recreate outdoors. Also, during the 2020 summer season, the National Forest

closed all public access to forests throughout California because of extreme wildfires in California. This put an unusually high demand on BLM campgrounds which remained open such as the Merced River Campgrounds.

*Table 3: Five Year Average for Nightly Campground Visits*

Five Year Average for Nightly Campground Visits FY 2018 to FY 2022*			
FY Year	RUPS Received	RUP Visitor Days	Annual Revenue
2018	956	9,951	\$23,135.00
2019	1,335	11,849	\$20,124.14
2020	1,248	10,491	\$21,662.81
2021	1,953	13,716	\$26,048.17
2022	1,268	8,863	\$16,821.29
2018-2022	Total: 6,760	Total: 54,870	Total: \$107,791
2018-2022	Average: 1,352	Average: 10,974	Average: \$21,558.28

\*Please see Appendix 6.2 for 5-year visitation and revenue table for breakdown by year.

### 3.5.3. Identification of Fee Program Goals

The BLM Mother Lode Field Office has identified the need for visitor use recreation fees to contribute more equitably to the cost of providing campgrounds and day-use area facilities and services to the recreating public. In review of the average operating costs for fee sites, recreational users currently contribute just less than 13% toward the operating costs. With an increase in efforts for fee compliance, in addition to the implementation of proposed fees, and the proposed future use of recreation.gov for online reservations and secure payments, the field office seeks to have recreational fees cover between 50% - 75% of operating cost. When the field office decides to make reservation services or other types of e-commerce options available in the future, an expanded amenity fee for reservation services would be charged in addition to any other standard or expanded amenity fees in accordance with 16 U.S.C. Based on projected increased visitation through improved opportunities and increased demand, and with increased fees and fee compliance efforts associated with the implementation of online reservation systems (recreation.gov), expected revenue increases will push closer to the desired percent of operating cost offset.

## 4. Fee Proposal

### 4.1. Summary of Expanded Amenity Fee Modifications

Site fee increases are proposed for three campgrounds (McCabe Flat, Willow Placer, and Railroad Flat) along with an additional vehicle fee. Day Use fees are not proposed to be added at this time and could be considered in the future.

To comply with Section 3(g)(2)(A) of FLREA, BLM must determine that recreation sites offer at least 5 of 9 specific amenities to charge an expanded amenity fee. Note that water is reflected in the table as not being supplied in the campgrounds; but it is supplied 2-5 miles upstream at the entrance near the Briceburg Suspension Bridge, which provides access to the Briceburg River Road and campgrounds. Table 4 shows the amenities provided at the three campgrounds.

*Table 4: Determination of Recreation Site Eligibility for Fee Collection*

Required Amenities (Minimum of 5 of the following)	McCabe Flat Campground	Willow Placer Campground	Railroad Flat Campground
Tent or Trailer Spaces	Yes	Yes	Yes
Picnic Tables	Yes	Yes	Yes
Drinking Water	No	No	No
Access Roads	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fee Collection by Employee or Agent	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reasonable Visitor Protection	Yes	Yes	Yes
Refuse Containers and Collection	Yes	Yes	Yes
Toilet Facilities	Yes	Yes	Yes
Simple Devices for Containing Campfires	Yes	Yes	Yes

Based on the information in Table 4, the field office determined Merced River RMA Campgrounds qualify as an expanded amenity fee site.

### 4.2. Existing and Proposed Fee Types

All visitors using recreation site amenities are required to obtain a recreation use permit (RUP). These permits can be obtained at self-service fee stations located in the campground. This business plan proposes to make permits available on recreation.gov, the federal government's one-stop center for reservations and trip-planning information. The Mother Lode Field Office will use various e-commerce technologies, as directed in BLM Instruction Memorandum 2022-019, to provide recreation visitors opportunities to find, reserve, and pay for campsites and day use within



the field office. Most of these options are provided through the interagency reservation service Recreation.gov.

When the field office decides to make reservation services or other types of e-commerce options available in the future, an expanded amenity fee for reservation services would be charged in addition to any other standard or expanded amenity fees in accordance with 16 U.S.C. 6802(g)(2)(G). Reservation services fees could range from \$0.50 to \$10.00 depending on the type of service provided. The reservation service fee is subject to contracting requirements and will be adjusted with contract changes or with future updates to the business plan. Visitors wishing not to pay the expanded amenity fee of reservation services, the traditional iron ranger with RUP envelopes will exist until the field office moves the fee area completely to e-commerce options and/or the RUP envelope is no longer available for fee payment.

Recreation staff and law enforcement all play a role in recreation fee site compliance. BLM staff directly interface with visitors to ensure visitors clearly understand payment requirements and procedures. First come, first serve permit receipts must be displayed on the campsite post. When recreation.gov reservations are implemented, users will have campsite markings provided or additional options may be explored for confirming payment and site occupancy. There is a consistent presence at recreation fee sites by BLM personnel. Compliance issues are addressed through recreation staff or law enforcement rangers as appropriate.

The following sections identify the proposed fee structures to be implemented. The proposed fees are also displayed in one comprehensive table in Appendix 6.2.

#### **4.2.1. Expanded Amenity – Campground Fee Update**

##### **1. McCabe Flat Campground**

McCabe Flat Campground is located 2.3 miles west (downstream) from the Briceburg suspension bridge along the Wild & Scenic Merced River. McCabe Flat Campground hosts one of the biggest sandy beaches in the area. There is a designated swimming area, and no dogs are allowed on the beach. All other areas of the Merced River Recreation Area allow dogs on leash. There are eleven campsites, eight are walk in sites and three are drive-up sites. There is one site that will be designated as a group site by combining two drive-up sites. This will reduce the total number of sites to ten sites. All campsites are within 200 feet of the river. Sites include a fire ring with barbeque grill, bear-resistant food locker, and picnic table. Two vault toilets and one Port-o-let are available at the campground. The campground is open year-round.



*McCabe Flat Campground*

<b>McCabe Flat Campground</b>	
Open:	Year-round
Reservations:	Currently first come, first served. Proposed for recreation.gov reservation system with implementation of modified fee.
Current Expanded Amenity Fees:	\$10 fee charge per campsite per night including parking for two vehicles. Senior and Access passes are the only accepted passes for fee discounts at expanded amenity fee sites per FLREA.
Proposed Expanded Amenity Fees:	An increase to \$20-\$30 per campsite per night including parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night as space allows up to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40-\$50 for group site including 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per group site. A reservation services fee will be charged for online reservation use. Senior and Access passes are the only accepted passes for fee discounts at expanded amenity fee sites per FLREA.
Number of Sites:	8 walk in tent sites, 2 vehicle drive-up sites
Group Picnic area	No
Usage:	High
Restrictions:	Dogs must always be under the owner's control. This is bear country so food must be secured overnight and when not attended. Always keep a clean camp and do not feed animals. No dogs allowed on beach, designated swimming area.
Closest Town:	Mariposa, CA, is fifteen miles away
Water:	Not at campground. Water is available at the beginning of Briceburg Road
Restrooms:	Vault Toilets and seasonal Port-o-let
Showers:	No

Dump Station:	No
Host:	No
Other Amenities:	River

**2. Willow Placer Campground**

The second BLM campground within the Merced River Recreation Management Area is Willow Placer. The campsites are located 3.6 miles downstream from the suspension bridge along Briceburg River Road. There are eight walk in sites and one drive-up group site. All campsites are within 200 feet of the river. Good swimming can be found a short walk down stream in the late summer. Sites include a fire ring with barbeque grill, bear-resistant food locker, and picnic table. One vault toilet and one Port-o-let are available at the campground. The campground is open year-round.



*Willow Placer Campground*

<b>Willow Placer Campground</b>	
Open:	Year-round
Reservations:	Currently first come, first served. Proposed for recreation.gov reservation system with implementation of modified fee.
Current Expanded Amenity Fees:	\$10 fee charge per campsite per night including parking for two vehicles. Senior and Access passes are the only accepted passes for fee discounts at expanded amenity fee sites per FLREA.
Proposed Expanded Amenity Fees:	An increase to \$20-\$30 per campsite per night including parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night as space allows up to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40-\$50 per group campsite per night including parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows up to a maximum of 6 vehicles per group site.

	A reservation services fee will be charged for online reservation use. Senior and Access passes are the only accepted passes for fee discounts at expanded amenity fee sites per FLREA.
Number of Sites:	8 walk in tent sites, 1 group drive-up site
Group Picnic area	No
Usage:	High
Restrictions:	Dogs must always be under the owner's control. This is bear country so food must be secured overnight and when not attended. Always keep a clean camp and do not feed animals.
Closest Town:	Mariposa, CA, is sixteen and half miles away
Water:	Not at campground. Water is available at the beginning of Briceburg Road
Restrooms:	Vault Toilet and seasonal Port-o-let
Showers:	No
Dump Station:	No
Host:	No
Other Amenities:	River

### **3. Railroad Flat Campground**

At the end of Briceburg River Road, 4.5 miles from the suspension bridge, is the Railroad Flat Campground. The trailhead for the Merced River Trail is located at the downstream end of the campground area. There are three walk-in sites and six drive-up sites. The Merced River Trail is a spectacular wildflower walk in spring, has great scenery, fine fishing, and amazing swimming during other times of the year. Sites include a fire ring with barbecue grill, bear-resistant food locker, and picnic table. One vault toilet and two Port-o-lets are available at the campground. The campground is open year-round.





*Railroad Flat Campground*

<b>Railroad Flat Campground</b>	
Open:	Year-round
Reservations:	Currently first come, first served. Proposed for recreation.gov reservation system with implementation of modified fee.
Current Expanded Amenity Fees:	\$10 fee charge per campsite per night including parking for two vehicles. Senior and Access passes are the only accepted passes for fee discounts at expanded amenity fee sites per FLREA.
Proposed Expanded Amenity Fees:	An increase to \$20-\$30 per campsite per night including parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle per night as space allows up to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. \$40-\$50 per group campsite per night including parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows up to a maximum of 6 vehicles per group site.
Number of Sites:	3 walk in tent sites, 6 drive-up sites
Group Picnic area	No
Usage:	High
Restrictions:	Dogs must always be under the owner's control. This is bear country so food must be secured overnight and when not attended. Always keep a clean camp and do not feed animals.
Closest Town:	Mariposa, CA, is seventeen and half miles away
Water:	Not at campground. Water is available at the beginning of Briceburg Road
Restrooms:	Vault Toilet and seasonal Port-o-let
Showers:	No
Dump Station:	No
Host:	No

Other Amenities:	River
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#### 4.2.2. Expanded Amenity – Reservation Services

**What is Recreation.gov?** Recreation One Stop (R1S) is a joint initiative among more than a dozen Federal agencies working together to support Recreation.gov, the online reservation and trip-planning service. Recreation.gov is a contract-delivered online service and mobile app that hosts more than 4,600 recreation areas to over 113,000 individual sites and experiences available for reservation. The Recreation.gov website hosts over 58 million visitors and securely processes more than 9 million reservations each year.

A form of Recreation.gov was created in 1995 to provide a reservation service to the public for Federal recreation facilities and activities. Today, the website and mobile app is the one-stop resource for reservations and extensive trip-planning services for the participating Federal agencies and their millions of visitors.

**Is there a cost for making reservations using Recreation.gov?** Yes. A Federal contractor operates Recreation.gov. The contractor receives a processing fee for reservations made through the online platform. Such fees, which are typically referred to as “reservation fees,” can be charged to the public as expanded amenity recreation fees under 16 U.S.C. 6802(g)(2)(G). Current fees can range from \$0.50 to \$10.00. The reservation fee is subject to contracting requirements on Recreation.gov and are adjusted with contract changes or with future updates to the Business Plan.

**What does a Recreation.gov reservation fee cover?** When a visitor makes a reservation on Recreation.gov, they are securing a recreation opportunity through the reservation platform at a cost to the government. To recuperate these costs, a reservation fee is applied. Participating agencies, including the BLM, are solely responsible for setting the reservation fee associated with each inventory item represented on Recreation.gov; however, the reservation fee must, at a minimum, be sufficient to cover the Contract Line-Item Number (CLIN) fee owed to the contract service provider for the specific transaction.

- The reservation fee reflects the cost of providing and continually improving an online public reservation service, which includes:
  - ensuring the site meets strict security requirements,
  - protecting users’ personal information,
  - providing field support,
  - monitoring and analyzing customer feedback, and
  - providing expanded hours for customer support for field staff and public users. Contact center hours are year-round, 10 a.m. – 12 a.m. Eastern Time (closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day).
- The R1S contract is funded through a firm-fixed-price mechanism where the contractor earns a commission (CLIN) for each reservation made by a visitor.



- Visitors can make reservations online through the Recreation.gov website, the Recreation.gov mobile app, by contacting an agent through the Contact Center (available seven days a week, 10 a.m. to 12 a.m. ET), or in many locations on-site at a ranger station.

### 4.3. Fee Calculation

BLM policy provides several items to consider when establishing recreation fee rates: direct cost to the government, level of benefits and services provided, and comparability with fees charged by others in the area. Direct costs consider a fee rate calculated to provide revenue to cover most of the projected annual operating and maintenance costs. Level of benefits and services provided looks at fees that are reasonable and fair based on the amenities available, and the services provided. Comparability fee calculation method considers a fee rate that is calculated to be comparable with fees charged at similar or comparable federal, state, and local recreation sites. The fee rate analysis in this business plan focuses on the comparability of other fees in the area. An analysis of comparable fees charged by similar state, federal, and local park facilities was completed. To determine whether BLM campground permits are currently priced at a comparable rate, an assessment of fees at other area campgrounds was conducted. This survey revealed the BLM Merced River Campgrounds are currently priced well below other area campgrounds with similar amenities.

*Table 5: Comparability Analysis- Expanded Amenities for Merced River Vicinity*

<b>Merced River MRA Vicinity</b>	<b>Expanded Amenity Fees-- Current</b>	<b>Drinking Water</b>	<b>Toilets</b>	<b>Agency/ Private</b>
McCabe Flat Campground	\$10/night, \$0 per additional vehicle	No	Vault	BLM
Willow Placer Campground	\$10/night, \$0 per additional vehicle	No	Vault	BLM
Railroad Flat Campground	\$10/night, \$0 per additional vehicle	No	Vault	BLM
Dirt Flat Campground	\$33/night, \$6 per additional vehicle	No	Vault	USFS
Dry Gulch Campground	\$33/night, \$6 per additional vehicle	No	Vault	USFS
Lost Claim Campground	\$23 single family site	No	Vault	USFS
Sweetwater Campground	\$26 single family site	Yes, in summer	Vault	USFS
Dimond O Campground	\$30 single family to \$60 double family site	Yes	Vault	USFS
Upper, Lower, North Pines	\$36 per site	Yes	Flush	NPS
Camp 4	\$10 per person	Yes	Flush	NPS
Tamarack Flat	\$24 per site	Creek (boil)	Vault	NPS
Porcupine Flat	\$20 per site	Creek (boil)	Vault	NPS

Mariposa Fairgrounds RV Park and Campground	\$30 per tent site	Yes	Flush	County
Indian Flat Campground/RV Park	\$20 tent site low season, \$30 tent site high season (April 1-Oct. 31), \$5 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> vehicle	Yes	Flush	Private

The proposed updates to expanded amenity fees for the campground are comparable to providers in each respective market for location and access to recreational opportunities. The locations provided by private business typically include amenities such as Wi-Fi, electricity and showers that are not comparable to the BLM campgrounds. The National Forests and Yosemite NP offer recreation sites in abundance in the vicinity of the Merced River RMA area, and the table represents a proportionate sampling in the area.

#### 4.4. Financial Projection

Financial projections require good-faith assumptions and professional estimates to confidently estimate future conditions with the proposed updates and new fee structure in place. The history of campground visitation at the Merced River RMA campgrounds is known by observation to be full on weekends during the peak summer months, with weekdays varying from 30-50% occupancy.

All campgrounds within the Mother Lode Field Office tend to fluctuate in fee compliance depending on BLM staff presence. The “little yellow envelopes” or recreation use permits (RUPs) people use to pay campground fees are also the sole source of visitation data beyond observational data. Additionally, use patterns can be interrupted by fire season, and most recently, COVID-19 disrupted campgrounds opening schedule by a minimum of three months in 2020. Rockslides along Hwy 140 have also curtailed visitation in the past. By considering observational data, RUPs visitation data, and the known fluctuations, a financial projection is considered possible only as a rough approximation. If the Mother Lode Field Office received an average of full payment at 50% capacity, six months out of the year, and 10% paid campsites the remaining six months of the year, we can estimate the initial proposed fees would provide about 40 percent of the annual operating costs. The tables below show a financial projection at 50% capacity (summer), plus 10% capacity (off-peak) with three updated fee increases

*Table 6 Financial Projection at half-full and 10% full, 100% fee compliance initial fee increase*

Recreation Area	Amenity Type	# Of Sites	Occupancy/Compliance Average	Proposed Fee	Projected Revenue
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$20 Single \$40 Group	\$16,380 \$3,640
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$20 Single \$40 Group	\$14,560 \$3,640

Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 50% for 6 months	\$20 Single	\$16,380
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$20 Single \$40 Group	\$3,294 \$732
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$20 Single \$40 Group	\$2,928 \$732
Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 10% for 6 months	\$20 Single	\$3,294
				Total:	\$65,580

*Table 7 Financial Projection at half-full and 10% full, 100% fee compliance second fee increase*

Recreation Area	Amenity Type	# Of Sites	Occupancy/Compliance Average	Proposed Fee	Projected Revenue
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$25 Single \$45 Group	\$20,475 \$4,095
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$25 Single \$45 Group	\$18,200 \$4,095
Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 50% for 6 months	\$25 Single	\$20,475
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$25 Single \$45 Group	\$4,117 \$823
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$25 Single \$45 Group	\$3,660 \$823
Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 10% for 6 months	\$25 Single	\$4,117
				Total:	\$80,880

*Table 8 Financial Projection at half-full and 10% full, 100% fee compliance third fee increase*

Recreation Area	Amenity Type	# Of Sites	Occupancy/Compliance Average	Proposed Fee	Projected Revenue
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$30 Single \$50 Group	\$24,570 \$4,550
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 50% for 6 months	\$30 Single \$50 Group	\$21,840 \$4,550
Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 50% for 6 months	\$30 Single	\$24,570
McCabe Flat Campground	Expanded	9 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$30 Single \$50 Group	\$4,941 \$915
Willow Placer Campground	Expanded	8 1	At 10% for 6 months	\$30 Single \$50 Group	\$4,392 \$915
Railroad Flat Campground	Expanded	9	At 10% for 6 months	\$30 Single	\$4,941
				Total:	\$96,184

The financial projections for the initial proposed increased fees, under the current level of fluctuating visitation, reveals that fees could provide about \$65,580, which is approximately 40% of projected operational costs for the Merced River RMA Campground. A second fee increase would provide about \$80,880, which is approximately 49% of projected operational costs and a third increase would provide about \$96,184, which is approximately 58% of projected operational costs. An increase in visitation and/or increase in fee compliance would help meet costs specific to the recreating public; and it would provide revenue for high quality recreational opportunities and the associated maintenance needs. Improvements to the facilities, expanded recreational opportunities, and an online reservation system are anticipated to increase visitation and revenue, however, it is unknown by how much.

#### **4.5. Use of Fees**

The historical norm for funding recreational site operations and maintenance is to draw on base appropriated funds and for the field office to supplement that funding with fee revenues collected within the specific field office. The base funding dollars for recreation sites have been flat to decreasing over past years due to inflation and administration priorities. With the projected increased fees and development of recreational programming in the field, we seek to modernize BLM recreation sites for the enjoyment of the recreating public. Below are areas the BLM Mother Lode Field Office would put recreation fees to this purpose:

- Service contracts, as needed, for site opening procedures, restroom cleaning, garbage collection, septic pumping, and water testing. \$40,000
- Maintain campground access trails and sites to Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) and American Disability Act (ADA) standards. \$20,000
- Replace degraded fire rings in all camp sites. \$10,000
- Coverage for cost of staff in the field for positive visitor contacts, providing information, and providing for the overall sense of health and safety in recreation sites. \$80,000
- Landscaping for promotion of native species and sedimentation reduction in the riparian corridor. \$10,000
- Maintain and improve existing environmental education and interpretive information services. \$20,000
- Maintain and expand the multi-use trail system for greater connectivity between communities and recreation areas. \$30,000
- Additional signage in Spanish. \$20,000

## 4.6. Impact of Fee Changes

### Anticipated Benefits to Updating Recreational Fee Rates:

The proposed fees in this business plan ensure that services may continue at the BLM operated Merced River Campgrounds. Services for the campgrounds include, trash removal, basic sanitation, provision of enforcement for health and safety, and fuels reduction. The updated fees will additionally allow for improved recreation experience through improved signage, interpretation, and amenities.

#### *Benefits to the Local Economy*

The Merced River campgrounds are near the communities of Midpines, El Portal, and Mariposa with recreational opportunity along the Merced River and Yosemite National Park. Therefore, the continued and improved service for campers in these communities is anticipated to contribute to the overall sustained success of retail outlets, outfitters, lodging, restaurants, nature and youth centers, and additional tourism industry associations.

#### *Benefits to the Environment*

The campground fee program enables the BLM Mother Lode to reduce impacts to sites and resources through provision of adequate infrastructure required for continuous visitation and human impacts. For example, bear boxes for storing food and bear proof dumpsters with routine trash removal service help keep bears alive and wild. Routine law enforcement patrols can go a long way toward reducing vandalism and looting. This helps retain the distinctive natural landscape features and preserve historic sites. Overall, a healthy environment is encouraged through regular staff presence, and the maintenance of trails and developed camping areas. Taken together, these agency efforts have a positive effect on the soil, vegetation, and river health.

#### *Socioeconomic Impacts, Including Low-Income Populations*

Socioeconomic impacts are expected to be low for many traveling populations, as the proposed rates are well below the costs of hotels, and in fair market analysis are less than nearby comparable campgrounds. Rates were considered with reference to the locality, and the new fees reflect a rate that is considered affordable for low-income populations. No new development within campgrounds was proposed that does not go to the immediate goal of security and environmental stewardship.

Dispersed camping is not allowed anywhere throughout the Merced River Canyon from Yosemite, the USFS, and BLM. Any site suitable for camping or habitation was developed a hundred years ago. When people seek no-cost options for camping, the BLM Mother Lode will educate the inquiring public on responsible recreation and provide locations where dispersed camping is available. Very few suitable sites exist close-by and are chiefly located up the steep and rough Burma Grade four-wheel drive road that leads up and out of the Merced River canyon to the north

of Briceburg. There is no access to water and finding sites that are safely located away from the road is difficult. Therefore, primitive camping is not recommended anywhere nearby.

### *Environmental Justice*

The BLM Mother Lode campgrounds are managed with respect to environmental justice, which is defined by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” Furthermore, the BLM Mother Lode abides by fair treatment as defined by the EPA, where “no group should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies.” In upgrading fees to the minimum for meeting operating costs with select and few amenities, campgrounds are anticipated to serve multiple segments of society with camping opportunities where a sense of health and safety are equally felt, valued, and appreciated, to include within low-income communities. Where camping with an amenity fee is not a possibility for individuals, the BLM Mother Lode will expand recreational opportunity through education on principles such as Leave No Trace and information sharing on locations available for dispersed camping. Where feasible and appropriate, Local managers may reward volunteer work with a local or regional recreation pass, Special Area permit, or Interagency Volunteer Recreation Pass.

Additionally, ensuring campgrounds meet or exceed accessibility requirements will be a priority, and developing this infrastructure is done with recreational fee dollars. Tourism growth is expected to continue and in acknowledgement of diversity of visitors, the BLM Mother Lode will implement additional signage for multiple languages.

### Anticipated Impacts of Not Changing Recreation Fee Rates:

Amenity campgrounds are considered functioning when most features are in operating condition, a sense of security prevails, and services are timely and routine. Impacts of not changing fee rates may mean deteriorating conditions, such as rotted campground markers remaining in place, food storage lockers that do not lock properly, degraded fire rings that are rusting out and remain in use, bathrooms with needed replacement parts or in need of repainting may not be refurbished in a timely way. Maintenance may be needed more frequently than is possible to provide due to lack of funding for contracts or workers. Areas may not offer a sense of security suitable for family outings.

### *Impacts to the Local Economy*

Campgrounds would not be expected to increase visitation or promote socioeconomic growth. A decrease in current visitation would be expected in the long term due to demand for adequate



services and amenities, but a decrease in current visitation may be a negligible impact to the economy as the campgrounds do not receive high visitation annually.

### *Impacts to the Environment*

Overtime, it is unknown if multiple developed campgrounds with amenities are sustainable when appropriated funding and recreational fees do not meet operating costs. Fees are a way of ensuring that those who actively use recreation opportunities make a greater, but reasonable contribution toward protecting and enhancing those opportunities than those who do not. Impacts to the environment would include hazards to human health due to poor sanitation, impacts to wildlife due to refuse, degradation of ecosystems through human impact, such as unmitigated erosion and the dumping of toxic waste.

### *Socioeconomic Impacts, Including Low-Income Populations*

Where current fees and visitation allow a campground to continue to operate within the bounds of health and safety, socioeconomic impacts would be negligible. Any reduction in services would carry socioeconomic impact, especially to low-income populations seeking more modest costs when on vacation or when utilizing amenity campgrounds when between housing.

### *Environmental Justice*

Principles of environmental justice would be upheld regardless of fee rates. Priority in funding services would be given to upholding fair treatment and equitable access. If upholding these principles is no longer feasible across all recreation sites, operating seasons or availability would be curtailed to ensure fair treatment occurs where it is possible to provide recreational opportunities. Providing infrastructure to meet Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) specifications will be prioritized over keeping a campground open when there is low to no visitation and introducing brochures or signage for multiple languages would be considered before investment in recreational programs that enhance leisure for one subset of the population only, for example.

## **5. Public Outreach**

### **5.1. Public Communication and Marketing Plan**

As part of the proposal to modify recreation site fees, the Mother Lode Field Office has been and will continue to conduct the following outreach to notify the public of its opportunity to review and provide comments:

- Public notice of proposed fee changes will continue to be posted onsite until implemented.
- News releases will be provided to local news outlets, informing the public of the proposed fee changes, and requesting public comment.

- Both the public notice and news releases will contain contact information for public comments on the proposed fee changes.
- Website information will inform the public of the proposed fee changes.
- Fee signs and paper materials will reflect the proposed fee changes, including notice of the fee rate(s), the passes that are accepted, and where the fees are charged.
- The BLM Mother Lode Field Office will present the campground fee increase proposal to the BLM California Recreation Resource Advisory Council (RAC). The FLREA mandates the appropriate Recreation RAC reviews all BLM recreation fee proposals prior to approval. Comments from both the public at large and the BLM California RAC will be considered prior to approval of the BLM Merced River Recreation Management Area business plan.
- The BLM monitors visitor uses to detect changes in site utilization, and documents written and oral communication from the public. Business plan review occurs on a biennial schedule from the date of the last signature. Future adjustments to approved fee schedules will reflect public comment and program implementation needs.

## 6. Appendices

### 6.1. Proposed Fee Table

*Table 9: Proposed Updated Expanded Amenity Fees*

McCabe Flat Campground	<p>\$20 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. 8 people per site max.</p> <p>\$40 for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per site. 24 people per group site max.</p> <p>A nominal reservation services fee will be charged for online reservations and/or payment when those services become available.</p>
Willow Placer Campground	<p>\$20 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. 8 people per site max.</p> <p>\$40 for group site to include parking for 4 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows up to a maximum 6 vehicles per site. 24 people per group site max.</p> <p>A nominal reservation services fee will be charged for online reservations and/or payment when those services become available.</p>
Railroad Flat Campground	<p>\$20 per night to include parking for 2 vehicles. \$5 per additional vehicle as space allows to a maximum of 4 vehicles per site. 8 people per site max.</p> <p>A nominal reservation services fee will be charged for online reservations and/or payment when those services become available.</p>

### 6.2. 5-year Visitation and Revenue table

*Table 10: 5-year Visitation and Revenue table for Breakdown by Year*

	FY18		FY19		FY20		FY21		FY22	
	RUPS	Revenue	RUPS	Revenue	RUPS	Revenue	RUPS	Revenue	RUPS	Revenue
Merced River Campgrounds	956	<b>\$23,135</b>	1335	<b>\$20,124</b>	1,248	<b>\$21,662</b>	1,953	<b>\$26,048</b>	1,268	<b>\$16,821</b>