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February 1, 2016

U.S. Forest Service  
Pacific Southwest Region  
Submitted online via online form

Re: Inyo, Sequoia, Sierra National Forest Plan Revisions, Wild and Scenic

To Whom It May Concern:

American Whitewater appreciates having the opportunity to provide comment on the Draft Wild and Scenic River Evaluation (“Draft Evaluation”) for the Revision of the Inyo, Sequoia and Sierra National Forest Land Management Plans. We write to ensure that the Forest Plan revisions accurately capture the outstandingly remarkable whitewater recreation values on rivers within the three forests. Although American Whitewater provided detailed comments on these values for all three forests during the Forest Assessment phase in 2013, the Draft Evaluation rarely mentions the paddling values of the rivers and streams within the Forests. Through these comments we hope to inform the Forest Service of these values, and we hope to see them reflected in the final evaluation.

American Whitewater is a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to conserving and restoring our country’s whitewater resources, and to enhancing opportunities to enjoy them safely. With over 5,800 members and 100 locally based affiliate clubs, we represent the conservation interests of tens of thousands of whitewater enthusiasts across the country. We place high value on protecting naturally functioning river ecosystems, including their fish and wildlife, geomorphic processes and incredible riparian forests. A significant percentage of our members either call the south Sierra home, or travel from across the globe to enjoy the whitewater recreation opportunities that the region provides, including on the rivers of the Inyo, Sierra and Sequoia National Forests.

#### **A. General Comments on the Draft Evaluation Document**

The Draft Evaluation is missing important information and is also difficult to navigate. Below, we highlight areas that need additional attention and make recommendations for improvements.

Where reaches are listed that were found to be not eligible, the Draft Evaluation fails to offer any information or basis for this finding. Numerous laws and policies require the

Forest Service to provide this information, including Forest Service Policy,<sup>1</sup> the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act,<sup>2</sup> the National Environmental Policy Act<sup>3</sup> and the Administrative Procedures Act.<sup>4</sup> Recent Forest Service decisions also support this action.<sup>5</sup> American Whitewater expects a detailed explanation within the Final Evaluation as to why each river is not eligible. For the rivers we outline in this letter, we hope that you will reconsider the value of paddling on these rivers, and at the very least we expect specific information about why whitewater boating is not a value.

Additionally, it appears that the Draft Evaluation fails to provide a complete list of rivers that the Forest Service found to be not eligible. We note the Draft Evaluation provides a list of not eligible rivers for the Inyo National Forest on page 23, but fails to provide a similar list for the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests. Further, there are numerous rivers that are listed as freely flowing on pages 15 and 16 that are not mentioned at all in the rest of the document. North Fork Willow Creek is one example. It is unclear from the Draft Evaluation whether these rivers were evaluated for eligibility at all.

The list of freely flowing rivers on pages 15 and 16 appears to be a combined list for all three Forests, yet is located within the section dedicated to the Inyo National Forest. For example, North Fork Willow Creek and Laurel Creek are contained in the list, but these creeks are located within the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, respectively. We recommend that the list of freely flowing rivers either be included before the Inyo National Forest evaluation section begins, or that the list be separated by each Forest.

Finally, the maps provided in the Draft Evaluation were of little use for determining the beginning and end points of the inventories segments, and more basically, where the rivers within the inventory are located. With almost 1,000 river segments covering nearly 400 miles of river, locating specific river reaches without detailed maps was an onerous task. In future comment periods pertaining to a comprehensive Wild and Scenic evaluation, we recommend that the Forest Service develop Google Earth layers of the inventoried reaches and make them accessible to the broader public. American Whitewater's National Whitewater Rivers Inventory has a geospatial Google Earth layer that can be downloaded and provides whitewater recreation opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

## **B. Comments on Wild and Scenic River Evaluation**

American Whitewater submitted thorough comments on rivers with outstandingly remarkable whitewater boating resources on all three forests during the Assessment Phase in 2013. Although the Draft Wild and Scenic River Evaluation notes on page 4 that "it was affirmed that all rivers of interest were included in the inventory," the document fails to mention many the rivers we recommended for inventory. Additionally, the rivers

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<sup>1</sup> Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, 81.2, requiring a comprehensive inventory and evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> 16 U.S.C § 1276(d)(1).

<sup>3</sup> 40 C.F.R. § 1502.14.

<sup>4</sup> 5 U.S.C § 706(2).

<sup>5</sup> See Response to Objection for the Idaho Panhandle National Forest Revised Land Management Plan to the Regional Forester, September 8, 2014, R-1, File Code 1570.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/state-summary/state/CA/.kml>

that we recommended that are included in the Draft Evaluation either fail to note whitewater recreation as part of the recreation ORV or neglect to list a recreation ORV. Although the Draft Evaluation indicates that our comments were received on pages 12-13, it appears as though our comments were not actually considered and there is no explanation for why our recommendations were rejected. The river reaches we outlined provide important whitewater recreation opportunities, and on some of these reaches, whitewater boating is the only method of accessing these river canyons. We encourage the Forest Service to consider the recreational and whitewater boating values of the rivers listed below within the Wild and Scenic Inventory.

### I. Rivers with Recreational Value that the Forest Service Failed to Inventory

The following rivers provide important whitewater recreation opportunities and were not inventoried in the Draft Evaluation. In our 2013 comments, we recommended that the following rivers be included in the inventory, and we again urge the Forest Service to evaluate them.

- a. Piute Creek (Sierra National Forest): Piute Creek is a tributary of the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. Boaters make the hike to the put-in by hiking over Piute Pass and make the Class V run to the South Fork San Joaquin, taking out on Florence Lake. This is a fun High Sierra run surrounded by spectacular glaciated granite. Boaters say it is one of the most beautiful areas they've kayaked through.<sup>7</sup>
- b. Brush Creek (Sequoia National Forest): Brush Creek is a tributary of the Kern River. From Rincon Camp to the Kern, it's a 1.5 mile Class IV(V) run that provides outstanding whitewater boating and has stunning scenery. This run is considered to be one of the best introductions to running waterfalls anywhere. Intermediate boaters flock to this run every year. While more challenging at higher flows, at lower flows it is appropriate for Class III+ boaters and it can be run as low as 50 cfs.<sup>8</sup>
- c. South Fork of the Middle Fork Tule, Middle Fork Tule (Sequoia National Forest): The Middle Fork Tule offers a spectacular Class IV-V whitewater run from Camp Nelson (on the South Fork of the Middle Fork Tule) to Springville/Globe (Lake



<sup>7</sup> [http://guttersoftheearth.blogspot.com/2009\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://guttersoftheearth.blogspot.com/2009_06_01_archive.html); and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dipF5TNIkd> from 3:32-5:40.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/2297>, and <http://oregonkayaking.net/creeks/brush/brush.html>. Photo credit: Will Oliver.

Success on the Middle Fork). With scenic waterfalls that provide clean lines, the Middle Fork Tule is an excellent creek run for skilled whitewater kayakers.<sup>9</sup>

- d. Dry Meadow Creek (Sequoia National Forest): Dry Meadow Creek is a tributary of the North Fork Kern River that provides spectacular whitewater boating opportunities, and scenic and geologic values. The 1.5-mile run from Dry Meadow to its confluence with the North Fork Kern includes the “Teacups” section, which is a



series of waterfalls that have been carved out of solid granite slab. More difficult than Brush Creek, this run is very popular with more skilled boaters. The reach was featured on the Annual Park Pass in 2013, and has been used in advertisements and outreach material.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Rivers Found Eligible Without Appropriately Recognizing the Recreational Value of Whitewater Boating

The rivers listed below were found eligible in the Draft Evaluation, but recreation is either not listed as an ORV, or recreation is an ORV but whitewater boating is not listed as a contributing activity. We noted the majority of these rivers in our 2013 comments, and urge the Forest Service again to evaluate the recreational value of the rivers listed below.

- a. San Joaquin River (Sierra National Forest): The Draft Evaluation finds that Segments 1, 3, 4 and 6 of the San Joaquin River are eligible for scenery values, and that Segment 3 is eligible for scenic and recreational values, including rafting. We note that Segments 4 and 6 also have outstanding whitewater values. Chawanakee Gorge (Dam 6 to Redinger Reservoir) has been described as one of the best one-day, Class V whitewater runs in all of California, or possibly the Northern Hemisphere.<sup>11</sup> And the Horseshoe Bend reach (from Redinger Dam to Kerckhoff Reservoir) is a scenic, classic pool-drop run that whitewater boaters enjoy when there are adequate flows.<sup>12</sup>
- b. Big Creek (Sierra National Forest): Big Creek is a tributary of the South Fork Merced that provides scenic Class II to Class V whitewater boating opportunities

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<sup>9</sup> A run description and great photos can be seen at: <http://www.awetstate.com/MTule.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.awetstate.com/DryMeadowCreek.html>; Photo credit: Cody Howard.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/289/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/287/>

during the spring and early summer. Boaters put-in at Fish Camp before the creek flows into Yosemite National Park.<sup>13</sup>

- c. Dinkey Creek (Sierra National Forest): From Dinkey Dome to the confluence with the North Fork Kings, Dinkey Creek provides a Class IV-V opportunity for whitewater paddlers and is known throughout the world for its outstanding whitewater and scenery. It consists of fun bedrock slides and ledges, and because there are no water diversions in this reach, Dinkey Creek has a dependable boating season.<sup>14</sup> The river is at risk for hydropower and water storage development.<sup>15</sup>

The Draft Evaluation covers portions of Dinkey Creek, but failed to fully evaluate the reaches that hold important whitewater recreation values. Strawberry Meadow down to the confluence with the NF Kings was left out of the evaluation entirely. Boaters put in at Dinkey Dome and take out at Dinkey Creek Campground; put in at the Campground and run below Strawberry Meadow to a logging spur road (a.k.a. the “Cherry Bomb Falls” section); and put in either at Ross Creek Trail or Old Mine Trail and make the run to the confluence with the North Fork Kings River. In addition to the whitewater boating values on these reaches, canyoneering is also an important activity between Strawberry Meadow and the confluence with Ross Creek.

- d. North Fork Kings River (Sierra National Forest): The North Fork of the Kings River has outstandingly remarkable whitewater and scenic values above Wishon Reservoir and below the Balch Afterbay to its confluence with the mainstem Kings River. These sections correspond to Segments 2 and 5 in the Draft Evaluation. Above Wishon Reservoir, the reach is accessible by hiking in and has been described as one of the most beautiful places to paddle on Earth. Black Rock Dam to Balch Afterbay is a very popular canyoneering section, and is considered by many to be most spectacular canyoneering section in California. Black Rock Dam to Weir Creek is known as Upper Jump Canyon and Weir Creek to Balch Powerhouse is known as Lower Jump Canyon. Downstream, boaters put-in at the Balch Afterbay and enjoy Class V whitewater through stunning scenery and remarkable geology to the confluence with Dinkey Creek, and later the mainstem Kings River. Below the confluence with Dinkey Creek, the run has a dependable season from the middle of winter through early summer. The last few hundred yards above the confluence with the mainstem Kings River provide excellent technical slalom practice, and was the site of the 1972 West Coast Olympic slalom kayaking trials.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/4772/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/3960/> and <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/177/>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.usbr.gov/mp/scao/storage/docs/phase1\\_rpt\\_fnl/tech\\_app/02\\_dinkey\\_creek.pdf](https://www.usbr.gov/mp/scao/storage/docs/phase1_rpt_fnl/tech_app/02_dinkey_creek.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/1723/>, <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/229/>, <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/228/>, and <http://www.darinmcquoid.com/northforkkings.html>

e. South Fork San Joaquin River (Sierra National Forest): In addition to the geologic and scenic values described in the Draft Evaluation, the South Fork San Joaquin also provides an outstanding whitewater run from Florence Lake to the mainstem San Joaquin. The run has high-quality whitewater with exceptional scenery.<sup>17</sup> (See also the run between Piute Creek and Florence Lake, and Mono Creek described below.)

f. Mono Creek (Sierra National Forest): Mono Creek is a tributary of the South Fork San Joaquin River, providing whitewater boaters with excellent and incredibly scenic Class IV and V opportunities. The Creek flows from its headwaters into Lake Edison, which is created by Vermillion Valley Dam, which is part of the Big Creek Hydroelectric Project. From the reservoir, Mono Creek flows to the South Fork San Joaquin. Boaters hike approximately 4 miles upstream of Lake Edison to run the upper section (within Segment 2, as described in the Draft Evaluation). The run below Lake Edison is a multi-day expedition down Mono Creek and into the South Fork San Joaquin. This run leads through several spectacular granite gorges and past Balloon Dome, near the confluence with the Middle Fork San Joaquin.<sup>18</sup>



g. Bear Creek (Sierra National Forest): Bear Creek is a tributary of the South Fork of the San Joaquin River. Boaters make the hike to the put-in at the Pacific Crest Trail and make the Class V+ run to the Bear Diversion Dam. The run drains the John Muir Wilderness, cuts through Sierra granite and is surrounded by scenic mountains.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>17</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/291/>; <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/6378/>; and The Best Whitewater in California: The Guide to 180 Runs, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Holbeck, Lars and Stanley, Chuck. Watershed Books, 1998. Pages p. 248-249.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/6260/>, <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/4011/>, and <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/4790/>. Photo credit: Ian Buckley.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/6339/>. Photo credit: Ian Buckley.

- h. Granite Creek (Sierra National Forest): Granite Creek is an undammed tributary of the Middle Fork San Joaquin that provides a scenic and high quality 7.4 mile Class III–Class V run. Boaters put in at Strawberry Mine and take out near the Cassidy Trail. The Draft Evaluation found that a 2.0 miles segment is eligible for prehistory values, and we recommend that the eligible reach be expanded to include the length of this run for its recreational value.<sup>20</sup>
- i. Hot Creek (Inyo National Forest): Hot Creek provides an outstanding Class II whitewater opportunity during the spring peak runoff. Boaters put in downstream of Hot Creek Ranch where public access begins and make the run down to Owens River Road. The creek winds through a unique canyon with stunning geology, hot springs and plentiful wildlife.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Rivers That Were Previously found Eligible or Suitable Where Conditions Have Changed and an Update is Warranted

The Draft Evaluation describes a number of rivers that the Forest Service found to be either eligible or suitable for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers system in the late 1980's or early 1990's. During the Forest Planning process, the Forest Service is required to re-evaluate rivers that have previously been found to be eligible where there are changed circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

Numerous advances in whitewater equipment and gear have made it possible to explore reaches that were considered to be unrunnable as recently as 25 years ago. As we note below, conditions have changed for many of the rivers that were previously found eligible and suitable, and whitewater recreation values exist where they may not have previously. Additionally, conditions have likely changed in other ways, as population has increased and there is more pressure on the forests, and climate change begins to impact ORVs, with a particular focus on fisheries values.

We recommend that the Forest Service evaluate the changed conditions relating to whitewater recreation on the following rivers:

- a. Lower Kern River (Sequoia National Forest): The Kern River below Lake Isabella to Kern Powerhouse #1 is an outstanding whitewater boating resource. The whitewater run provides a pool and drop run with scenic granite cliffs, and is a section of river that Holbeck and Stanley describe as “paradise” for skilled whitewater kayakers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/4591/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/10700/#tab-map>

<sup>22</sup> 36 CFR § 219.7(c)(2)(vi); Forest Service Handbook: 1909.12\_82.4.

<sup>23</sup> Holbeck and Stanley, p. 295-297. See also:

<https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/220/>;

<https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/221/>;

<https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/222/>; and

<http://www.dreamflows.com/guides/Kern/JungleRun/index.php>.

The Draft Evaluation outlines that the Forest Service found Lower Kern River eligible for Wild and Scenic in 1988, and updated the eligibility determination in 1995. Segment 1 (Lake Isabella Main Dam to Borel) was given a scenery ORV, and Segment 2 (Borel to Democrat) and Segment 3 (Democrat to FS Boundary) were given scenery, recreation and wildlife populations ORVs. The Draft Evaluation determined that no updates were warranted. We disagree.

Eligibility information for the Lower Kern River is discussed in the 1988 Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, FEIS. The document notes that whitewater boating and kayaking occur on Segments 1 and 2, but states that it is prohibited on Segment 3.<sup>24</sup>

In light of the changed information provided above, we recommend that the eligibility determination be updated by:

- Adding a recreation ORV to Segment 1 of the Lower Kern because of its outstandingly remarkable whitewater recreation values,
- Clarifying that whitewater boating is allowed on Segment 3, and
- Updating the recreation ORV for Segments 2 and 3 to include whitewater boating.

- b. Kings River (Sequoia National Forest): The Draft Evaluation references the 1991 Kings River Special Management Area Implementation Plan (“SMA Plan”) for eligibility information for Segments 3, 4 and 5. Segment 3 runs from the end of the Wild and Scenic boundary to Garnet Dike; Segment 4 runs from Garnet Dike to the boundary of the SMA; and Segment 5 runs from the boundary of the SMA to high water line of Pine Flat Reservoir. The 1991 SMA Plan specifies that whitewater rafting is an important activity only on Segments 4 and 5, from Garnet Dike to Pine Flat Reservoir.<sup>25</sup> The Draft Evaluation concludes that no changes or updates are needed from the current review. We disagree.

Whitewater boating is a recreational ORV for Segments 3, 4 and 5. From the Confluence of the South Fork Kings River to Kirch Flat Campground, the river provides outstanding whitewater opportunities and stunningly scenic granite cliffs and dependable flows in the early spring through summer.<sup>26</sup>

- c. South Fork San Joaquin River (Sierra National Forest): The South Fork San Joaquin from Piute Creek to Florence Lake provides an outstanding whitewater run, with fun rapids and beautiful scenery.<sup>27</sup> In 1988, the Forest Service found this reach to be eligible in the Sierra National Forest Land Resource and Management

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<sup>24</sup> Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, FEIS, 1988. P. E-29.

<sup>25</sup> Kings River Special Management Area Implementation Plan, 1991. Page 68-69.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/224/>, and <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/225/>.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/292/>; <http://www.darinmcquoid.com/sfsanjoaquin.html>, and Holbeck and Stanley, pages 246-247.

Plan for its outstandingly remarkable geologic, scenic and wildlife values, and the river was found to be suitable in 1992. We encourage the Forest Service to update the suitability determination in light of this new activity.

- d. Middle Fork Joaquin (Inyo and Sierra National Forests): Considered to be a classic multiday kayak run and coveted by paddlers around the world, the Middle Fork San Joaquin River provides a challenging and incredibly scenic whitewater run from the southern boundary of Devils Postpile National Monument to Mammoth Pool. The Draft Evaluation notes that the Middle Fork San Joaquin was found to be eligible in 1988 from Rainbow Falls to the confluence with the North Fork San Joaquin, and that in 1992 the river was determined to be suitable from its headwaters to the confluence with the North Fork. The 1986 Sierra National Forest Land Resource Management Plan, Appendix E, states that there is no rafting on the river, and makes no mention of kayaking.<sup>28</sup> We were unable to obtain a copy of the 1992 suitability study in time for these comments, but presume that the suitability study is based off of the eligibility study. We encourage the Forest Service to update the eligibility and suitability studies to ensure that the outstandingly remarkable whitewater boating value on this reach is recognized.<sup>29</sup>



### **C. Hydropower on the Forest**

Hydropower projects have a considerable footprint on rivers that flow through USFS lands. To ensure that ecological and recreation values are protected, and impacts to these values are properly mitigated for, Forest Service staff should actively participate in the licensing and post-licensing consultation associated with hydropower projects on the Forest licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

We recommend that Forest Plans outline that mitigation for dams blocking or diverting rivers on USFS lands should include river access, public flow information for affected river reaches, and in cases where dams alter flows, mitigation shall ensure that ecological and recreational values are protected. Unnatural flow patterns can negatively impact whitewater recreation opportunities, and more importantly, they can be disastrous for species that have evolved in free flowing rivers. As an example, the Foothill Yellow Legged Frog, which is a USFS species of concern, is negatively affected by flow patterns that are outside the natural norms in terms of timing, magnitude and rates of change, particularly during the early life stages. Hydropower facilities and other water diversion facilities can have a strong influence on natural flow patterns.

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<sup>28</sup> Sierra National Forest Land Resource Management Plan, 1986, Appendix E, p. 7E-13.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/290/>. Photo credit Darin McQuoid.

## **D. Conclusion**

American Whitewater's National Whitewater Rivers Inventory<sup>30</sup> offers a relatively comprehensive view of paddling in California, and we have provided numerous relevant links to the inventory for specific rivers throughout our comments. This Inventory also has a geospatial Google Earth layer associated with it that can be downloaded at the bottom of the above referenced page. Additionally, guidebooks provide valuable information on whitewater values on rivers within the forests. In particular, we recommend The Best Whitewater In California by Lars Holbeck and Chuck Stanley.<sup>31</sup> These resources provide information that can inform the Forest Planning process and provide a better perspective of the recreational opportunities these rivers offer. We encourage the Forest Service to make use of these and other resources, both for the eligibility inventory and for updating existing eligibility and suitability determinations.

Thank you for considering our comments. We look forward to working with the Forest Service and the public in developing a protective and nationally consistent management plan for the Inyo National Forest, and the others located within the Sierra Bio-region.

Sincerely,



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Megan Hooker  
Associate Stewardship Director

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/state-summary/state/CA/>

<sup>31</sup> The Best Whitewater in California: The Guide to 180 Runs, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Holbeck, Lars and Stanley, Chuck. Watershed Books, 1998.