February 25, 2022

Mr. Brian Newland  
Department of the Interior  
Office of the Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs  
Attn: Office of Federal Acknowledgment  
1849 C Street NW, MS—4071 MIB  
Washington, DC 20240

Subject: Reference Petitioner #82: Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation (SSMN), CA.

Dear Mr. Newland,

The Merced River Conservation Committee (MRCC) respectfully submits the following comments supporting the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation’s Petition seeking self-determination, self-governance, and acknowledgment through the federal recognition process. This designation will allow the tribe to assert its tribal sovereignty rights. Federal recognition will allow the tribe to continue its long historical Tribal Culture and Tradition and Tribal Subsistence Fishing in the Merced River and Chowchilla River Watersheds of Mariposa County.

The MRCC is a local volunteer organization of members interested in the Merced River watershed and its future, based in Mariposa County. Our principal interests are fisheries and aquatic habitat, trail and boating recreation, and historic sites. MRCC members enjoy fishing, rafting, and hiking on the Merced River and are interested in the long-term restoration and protection of the Merced River and its watershed. Our involvement has been and is with projects that protect and enhance the Merced River Watershed, from its headwaters to the Bay-Delta.

The MRCC was established in 2006 in preparation and response to the Merced River Hydroelectric Projects’ Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) relicensing process, initiated in 2008 by Merced Irrigation District and Pacific Gas and Electric projects. The Committee, and its members, have participated and intervened in the License proceedings on behalf of natural, recreational, and historical resources of the Merced River. It has collaborated in the FERC process with a large number of Relicensing Participants, including the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation with co-joining interests in Merced River resources, and other San Joaquin and Sacramento River watersheds, affected by hydropower facilities and operations. I have attached a list of documents that the tribe has submitted which identifies the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation interests in the natural and historical resources of the Merced River Watershed. There are no FERC regulated dams on the Chowchilla River, but the SSMN Tribal Council has expressed Tribal interests and historic uses of this watershed (Chapman, 2022, pers. comm.).

The primary concerns of SSMN are the identified needs for federal and state wildlife agencies to evaluate and recover anadromous fisheries and aquatic habitat of the Merced River (along with the currently non-listed anadromous species, fall-run Chinook salmon and Pacific lamprey). Reconnection and restoration of anadromous fish species, including Central Valley Steelhead trout and Central...
Valley Spring-run Chinook salmon (Federally Protected Species under the Endangered Species Act) are important Tribal goals for the Merced River. Tribal interests in the Merced River include all fish and aquatic resources. Prehistoric and historic use of salmon and aquatic life by the indigenous Tribes of the Merced River have been (and continue to be) of enormous significance, and the anadromous fish uses include: 1) ceremonial purposes for salmon; 2) salmon as a cultural wealth elevating factor in historic and prehistoric use; 3) seasonal significance in the Oral traditional calendar—signifying time; 4) essential trade items; 5) salmon elevation of spawning as an indicator of elevation of village locations; and 6) mythology of spawning introduction at higher elevations (indigenous planting). Those fish and aquatic resources have been greatly impacted by human activities on the Merced River, including effects of the hydroelectric power projects. Restoration of those anadromous fish populations is needed to restore lost Tribal resources and cultural values.

The Tribe has reviewed and endorses the direction of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) restoration and management goals and objectives for the Merced River (NMFS, 2014). The particular objectives and focus of the plan, relevant to Tribal interests, are those which seek to evaluate and restore four species, which the SSMN have long held in highest cultural and tribal values: a) Steelhead trout (Oncorhynchus mykiss); b) Spring-run Chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tsawytscha); fall- and late fall-run Chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tsawytscha); and Pacific lamprey (Lampetra tridentata). The Tribe recommends a persistent and concerted effort by NMFS to focus recovery actions on the Merced River populations.

The Tribe has worked closely with our local organization on these fisheries and watershed issues during the past 15 years. They participated in all of the FERC relicensing meetings and information exchange on the Merced River Hydropower relicensing, in collaboration with federal, state, local, and non-government organizations. We believe that tribal federal recognition is vital to understanding, preserving, sustaining and honoring the region’s natural and cultural heritage. We support the tribe’s petition for federal recognition.

Sincerely,

Michael Martin, Ph.D.
Director
PO Box 2216
Mariposa, California 95338

Email: mmartin@sti.net

Attachment

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Attachment to Letter of Support for Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation Federal Recognition, February 25, 2022.

The Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation has commented to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) concerning Fisheries and Tribal Cultural Interests on the Merced River Watershed. These are the submissions to relevant federal agencies and the public by the SSMN in support of their goal of restoring native fisheries of the Merced River.


