

'Wild and Scenic' designation backed

By MIKE MORRIS/ The Union Democrat/ Feb. 26, 2014

Cheers broke out in a crowded boardroom Tuesday after the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors unanimously voiced support for state Wild and Scenic designation of the Mokelumne River.

The resolution requests the county's representatives in the state Legislature introduce and support legislation to bring about state Wild and Scenic designation.

About 20 people, most supporting the designation, spoke before the board. They said it would protect the river while promoting tourism and recreation.

A few opponents said the designation would be shortsighted and could impact potential water projects along the river in the future.

Afterward, each board member explained their support for the designation.

"This gives us an opportunity to protect our natural resource," said Chairwoman Debbie Ponte.

The board's resolution supports California Wild and Scenic designation of the Mokelumne River from Salt Springs Dam, on the North Fork of the Mokelumne River, headed west to the eastern boundary of Pardee Reservoir.

California Wild and Scenic rivers that possess "extraordinary scenic, recreational, fishery or wildlife values shall be preserved in their free-flowing state," according to conservation group Friends of the River.

Longtime supervisor Merita Callaway said after the meeting that she had tried "over the years" to get support for the designation. She commended District 2 Supervisor Chris Wright for bringing the issue back before the board.

Callaway said supporters must now approach Amador County leaders as the river straddles the two counties.

According to the Calaveras board's resolution, protecting the river with the special designation will not interfere with water projects planned for the county or affect existing water rights.

The Mokelumne River provides water to more than 1.4 million people and powers more than 200,000 homes in the East Bay.

The board's resolution covers topics ranging from how the designation would respect private property rights to how the river's fish provide "protein-rich food" to county residents.

"The Mokelumne River is beloved by local residents of all income, ages and abilities who use it for recreation, respite, spiritual renewal and youth education," the resolution states. "The river is critically important to the economic future of Calaveras County because it attracts anglers, boaters and other visitors interested in river-related recreation, who spend money in local businesses."

Among those who spoke at the standing-room-only meeting in support of the designation were Lisa Boulton, executive director of the Calaveras Visitors Bureau, and David Albert, owner of the historic Hotel Leger in Mokelumne Hill.

An upcoming three-year commercial rafting pilot project is also planned for the Mokelumne River.

George Wendt, owner of Angels Camp-based O.A.R.S whitewater rafting company, wore a sticker that read, "Moke Ye\$ Tourism."

"This is a great first step in my mind," he said of the board's resolution. "It definitely sends a real strong signal to have a unanimous vote."