

# RIVER'S STATUS MAY BE UPGRADED

## STATE WEIGHS WILD AND SCENIC PROTECTION FOR PART OF MOKELUMNE

By **Dana M. Nichols**

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SAN ANDREAS - After trying and failing for 25 years to get federal leaders to protect a stretch of the Mokelumne River above Pardee Lake with wild and scenic designation, local river advocates were thrilled Friday with notice that state leaders will at least consider it.

On Friday, State Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, introduced Senate Bill 1199, which would grant state wild and scenic status to 37 miles of the river.

"It is not as strong as federal designation," admitted Foothill Conservancy board member Katherine Evatt. Still, Evatt said such state designation, if it passes, would effectively prevent new dams on the upper river, because the state has power to regulate water rights and water quality.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issues licenses for most major dams, which is why a federal wild and scenic designation would be the strongest measure.

Currently, there are no proposals for new dams between Pardee and Salt Spring Reservoir on the Mokelumne. But in water-hungry California, such proposals are never far away.

In 2012, East Bay Municipal Utility District directors dropped a proposal to raise the height of Pardee Dam and expand the reservoir upstream past the Highway 49 bridge after encountering opposition from river recreationists and some Mother Lode residents.

The Mokelumne River has long been a white-water recreation destination and as such is a boon to the region's economy, river advocates argue.

Members of the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors took that into consideration when they voted unanimously in late February to support designation of the Mokelumne as a state wild and scenic river.

"I am very excited," Calaveras County District 3 Supervisor Chris Wright said. "This is something I have been working on for a long time."

The river forms the northern edge of Wright's district. Also, before being elected to the board, he served as executive director of the Foothill Conservancy, a group that has long led efforts to protect the Mokelumne from additional dam development.

Wright said that after the Calaveras board voted in favor of the wild and scenic designation, he discussed the idea with Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, whose 5th District includes the river. He said Bigelow indicated he needed more information before he could decide whether to support or sponsor such a measure.

There was no immediate response to phone messages and an email sent to Bigelow's staff Friday afternoon.

Although the Mokelumne is not in Hancock's district in the East Bay, her constituents do drink the river's water.

"The Mokelumne River is an extremely important state resource that provides high-quality drinking water to 1.4 million East Bay water users. It deserves to be recognized and protected as a Wild and Scenic River," Hancock said in a written statement.

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