

Exploring the Middle Fork American River Watershed

The Middle Fork American River Watershed

The Middle Fork American River Watershed is located on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada between Lake Tahoe and Auburn, California. The Watershed is drained by the Middle Fork American River, which begins in the Granite Chief Wilderness, near the crest of the Sierra Nevada, and ends at the North Fork American River, near Auburn. Two primary water bodies feed the Middle Fork American River: Duncan Creek and the Rubicon River. These in turn are fed by many smaller streams and creeks, including Long Canyon Creek and the South Fork Rubicon River. All of the water that flows into and down the Middle Fork American River eventually makes its way to the North Fork American River, which flows into Folsom Reservoir, a major component of the Central Valley Project. Most of the land in the Watershed is public land managed by the Tahoe National Forest (TNF), the Eldorado National Forest (ENF), or the California Department of Parks and Recreation.



The Middle Fork American River Project

The Middle Fork American River Project (known as the MFP) is located in the Watershed. The MFP is a multi-purpose water supply and hydroelectric project owned and operated by the Placer County Water Agency (PCWA). The MFP was the first water project in California that was built by a county for the benefit of its residents. The MFP supplies water for homes, industry, and agriculture within western Placer County and clean renewable energy to the California electric grid.



The MFP includes two major storage reservoirs: French Meadows and Hell Hole reservoirs, five smaller regulating reservoirs and diversion pools, five powerhouses, and a 20-mile long tunnel system that conveys water through the Watershed.

Detailed information about PCWA and the MFP facilities is available at: www.pcwa.net.



Operation of the MFP

Operation of the MFP is guided by regulatory and contract requirements, the physical capacity of the MFP facilities, and water availability. These factors influence water levels in the MFP reservoirs, especially Hell Hole and French Meadows reservoirs. In general, water levels in these two reservoirs are highest in the late spring, gradually decline through the summer and fall, and reach their lowest levels during the winter.

Daily water level information for Hell Hole and French Meadows reservoirs is available at cdec.water.ca.gov (search HHL and FMD).

Operation of the MFP also influences flow in the rivers and streams downstream of the MFP facilities, especially the Middle Fork and North Fork American rivers downstream of Ralston Afterbay, where flow fluctuates daily due to releases from Oxbow Powerhouse. Except in an emergency situation, changes in flow (water depth and velocity) occur gradually and may not be noticeable, although they may ultimately be significant. KEEP AWARE. Make sure that you do not get stranded by rising water.

In rare instances, river flow may change suddenly due to a system malfunction. If this occurs, a siren will sound. If you hear a siren, immediately get out of the stream or river and move to higher ground.

Real-time flow information for the Middle Fork American River below Oxbow Powerhouse is available at cdec.water.ca.gov (search OXB).



Recreation Opportunities and Activities in the Middle Fork American River Watershed

The varied terrain and natural resources in the Middle Fork American River Watershed provide abundant year-round recreation opportunities. Recreation use in the upper parts of the Watershed is managed by the Tahoe National Forest (TNF) and the Eldorado National Forest (ENF). The area between Ralston Afterbay and Folsom Reservoir is part of the Auburn State Recreation Area (Auburn SRA), which is managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR). These agencies should be contacted regarding current road and facility conditions, road and fire restrictions, and to obtain permits, if required. They can also provide you with valuable resource information and detailed maps that will help make your trip safe and enjoyable.

Campgrounds and Picnic Areas

Developed campgrounds and picnic areas are located throughout the Watershed, mostly concentrated around the large reservoirs. Please refer to the map and matrices on the opposite side of this pamphlet for facility locations and information about amenities, seasonal closures, fees and reservation requirements.

Camping outside of undeveloped campgrounds is allowed in the TNF and ENF and at specific locations in the Auburn SRA. Please contact these agencies to inquire about restrictions and permits.



Boat Ramps

Boat ramps are available at the larger reservoirs in the Watershed including Loon Lake and French Meadows, Hell Hole and Stumpy Meadows Reservoirs. Large parking areas for boat trailers are available near all of the boat ramps, as are picnic tables and bathrooms.



Vistas

Several vistas offer impressive views of the Watershed. Hell Hole Vista provides an exceptional view of Hell Hole Reservoir and an interpretive display. Scenic viewpoints and nature trails are available at Grouse Falls and Big Trees Grove. For those willing to hike, or with a 4x4 or high-clearance vehicle, Duncan Peak Lookout on Bald Mountain offers spectacular views of the Granite Chief Wilderness and the Crystal Range.



Wilderness Areas

Granite Chief and Desolation Wilderness Areas offer outstanding opportunities for primitive camping. Within the Watershed, Granite Chief Wilderness can be reached using trails that begin at the upper ends of French Meadows and Hell Hole reservoirs. Desolation Wilderness can be reached from Loon Lake. Please contact the Forest Service to inquire about restrictions and permits, and to obtain detailed Wilderness maps.



Trails

Hundreds of miles of trail traverse the Watershed, many of which were originated by Native Americans and the early pioneers. Most of these trails are open to all users, but for safety reasons and to protect resources, some are designated for specific uses. Brochures and detailed trail maps are available at any Forest Service office and at the Auburn SRA. Designated uses are typically shown on signage at the trailheads.

Endurance Events

The Watershed is home to several annual endurance events that attract competitors from around the world. These include: the Western States Endurance Run (www.wser.org), a 100-mile foot race that traverses the Watershed from Squaw Valley to Auburn along the historic Western States Trail; the Way Too Cool 50K, which passes through the North Fork American River canyon, utilizing the Auburn SRA trail system (www.wtc50k.com); and the Tevis Cup Ride, a 24-hour, 100 plus mile equestrian race that has been ranked one of the top 10 endurance competitions in the world (www.teviscup.org).

Fishing

Excellent fishing opportunities are available throughout the Watershed. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife regularly stocks French Meadows Reservoir with rainbow trout and Hell Hole Reservoir with rainbow and brown trout and Kokanee. Brown trout and rainbow trout are found in the rivers and streams throughout the Watershed. Smallmouth bass can be found in the lower North Fork American River.



The Rubicon River, from Hell Hole Reservoir to the Middle Fork American River confluence, is a designated California Wild Trout Stream, meaning it is managed to protect and enhance wild rainbow trout populations. State fishing regulations, including licensing requirements, apply to all waters within the Watershed.



Hunting

Except for the State Game Refuge near French Meadows Reservoir, all public lands within the ENF and TNF are open to hunting. Hunting in the Auburn SRA is also allowed, except in specific restricted areas. State hunting regulations, including licensing requirements, apply to all lands within the Watershed. Game species in the Watershed include deer, California and mountain quail, dove, bandtail pigeon, and wild turkey.



Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) Use
OHV travel is allowed throughout the Watershed, but only on designated roads and subject to seasonal closures. The Rubicon Trail near Loon Lake is one of the oldest and toughest OHV trails in the world. Developed OHV tracks are available at China Bar off of Foresthill Road, and at Mammoth Bar in the Auburn SRA.

Please refer to ENF and TNF Motor Vehicle Use Maps.

Whitewater Boating

During certain times of the year, whitewater boating opportunities are available on the Rubicon River between Ellicott Bridge and Ralston Afterbay, and on the Middle Fork and North Fork American rivers, between Ralston Afterbay and Folsom Reservoir. Several commercial outfitters offer guided rafting trips on the Tunnel Chute Run, a 15-mile run with exciting rapids and beautiful scenery. Calmer runs, perfect for novice and beginner boaters, are available downstream of the Tunnel Chute Run. For more information visit: www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1346



Area History

Native Americans have lived in the Watershed going back as far as 8,000 years. Two major tribes, the Foothill Nisenan (Maidu) and the Washoe are known to have lived in the area, surviving on its bountiful natural resources; hunting, fishing and supplementing their diets with native berries and edible nuts, including acorns and pine nuts. The Nisenan also managed their food supply through controlled burns that thinned out underbrush and encouraged the growth of edible grasses and seed-producing plants. The two tribes traded with each other, using a trading route over the Sierra that traversed the Middle Fork American River, generally following a path along Mosquito Ridge. By the nineteenth century, these Native Americans served as guides for Euroamerican fur traders and pioneer emigrants.



The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848 dramatically transformed the Watershed. Thousands of miners, intent on making their fortune, flooded the region. By 1849, more than \$10 million worth of gold (in 1849 dollars) had been mined in the area. Gold mining, in turn, prompted the need for lumber, and a thriving timber industry was established that continues to this day. Entire towns, including the gateway communities of Auburn, Cool, Foresthill, and Georgetown sprang up to support the miners and loggers.

Today, the area's Gold Rush history is evident in many historic buildings and structures scattered throughout the Watershed, and in landscape features such as Tunnel Chute rapid on the Middle Fork American River, which was formed when miners blasted a tunnel through bedrock to reroute the river. To learn about heritage sites in the Watershed and local Gold Rush life, visit the Foresthill Divide Museum in Foresthill, or the Placer County Museum in Auburn.



Natural Resources

The ENF, TNF, and CDPR manage land and recreation use in the Watershed to protect its natural resources, including habitats that support several rare, threatened, and endangered plants and animals. Please do your part to keep the Watershed clean and healthy, and to help protect its unique resources.



Motor Vehicle Use

Some roads in the Watershed are closed to public vehicular use, either seasonally or year-round to reduce disturbances to wildlife and other resources, and to enhance other recreation experiences. It is the users' responsibility to know which roads are closed. Roads that are open to public use are displayed on Motor Vehicle Use Maps, which are free to the public and are available at www.fs.usda.gov or at local Ranger District offices.

Preventing Forest Fires

The Watershed is heavily forested and subject to wildfires, especially during the hot, dry summer months. Therefore, it is important to properly extinguish and dispose of cigarettes and to follow campfire requirements. Both the Forest Service and the Auburn SRA may suspend campfires during periods of high fire danger conditions. Please contact these agencies for information about current conditions, restrictions, and permits.

King Fire, Sept. 2014. Burned 97,000 acres.

Points of Interest

While on your journey, take the time to explore the natural and historic features that are unique to the Middle Fork American River Watershed.

Big Trees Grove

Big Trees Grove is the most northerly stand of California's Giant Sequoias. The ancient trees in this small, remote grove are an estimated 1,000 - 2,000 years old and tower over the rest of the landscape. The grove is accessible along a half-mile long self-guided interpretive loop trail.



Big Crater and Little Crater Geologic Areas

These two natural amphitheatres are located on the north slope of Ralston Ridge. These geologic oddities are not actually craters, they are the result of enormous landslides that occurred thousands of years ago during one of the last ice ages. Big Crater is vast, covering 175 acres; Little Crater covers a relatively modest 50 acres.

The Western States Trail

The Western States Trail traverses the Watershed from Squaw Valley to Auburn, following the same routes first used by the Washoe and Maidu tribes and later by explorers, pioneers and gold-seekers. No Hands Bridge, which crosses the North Fork American River near Auburn, was the world's longest concrete arch bridge when it was built in 1912. No Hands Bridge and the portion of the Trail from Last Chance to Michigan Bluff are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



Gateway Communities

The Middle Fork American River Watershed is accessible by paved roads but otherwise is relatively undeveloped. There are no grocery stores or service stations but drinking water is available at most of the developed campgrounds. The good news is that food, gas, ice, information, and all of the supplies you may need are available in the nearby Gold Rush communities of Auburn, Cool, Foresthill and Georgetown.



Auburn - Hub of the Placer Foothills

Auburn, the Placer County seat, played a significant role in California Gold Rush history. Today, this history is visible in the restored 19th century buildings of Old Town and at the Placer County Museum, in first floor of Auburn's historic courthouse. Auburn offers a wide variety of shopping and services as well as wine trails, biking, hiking and equestrian trails, golf, farms, fine restaurants, and conserved natural spaces. Lodgings in this historic gold mining town include hotels, motels and bed and breakfasts that can be booked at www.oldtownauburnca.com.



Cool - Gateway to El Dorado County

First established in the 1880's, Cool was a stage coach stop during the Gold Rush and today is a stop on the El Dorado County Adventure Loop (www.adventurelooptour.com). This quaint country town offers several restaurants, a modern grocery store, gas, gifts, and a visitor's center. The Auburn State Recreation Area's trail system can be accessed behind the Cool Fire Station.

Foresthill - Citadel of the Pines

Foresthill is located on the Foresthill Divide, a broad ridge located between the North and Middle Forks of the American River. The Foresthill Divide is one of the earliest explored areas of the California Gold Rush, and continues to be the home of active local Native American Tribes. Local history can be explored at the Foresthill Divide Historical Museum, which includes a blacksmith shop and the original Foresthill Jail. Local services in Foresthill include restaurants, gas, and shops, a bed and breakfast, and vacation rentals.



Georgetown - Gateway to the Rubicon

Located on the divide between the Middle and South Forks of the American River is the community of Georgetown. This historic Main Street features many of the original 19th century structures and facades that were erected during the Gold Rush. Georgetown is the home of the popular Jeep and Jeeps Jamborees, annual OHV events held on the Rubicon Trail. Every year, hundreds of OHV enthusiasts converge on Georgetown for gas and supplies, to enjoy a meal at one of the many restaurants, or to peruse the local antique shops on Main Street.



For More Information Visit or Contact:

Tahoe National Forest
www.fs.usda.gov/tahoe/
Tahoe National Forest Supervisor's Office
631 Coyote Street, Nevada City, CA 95959
(530) 265-4531
TDD: (530) 934-7724
American River Ranger District Office
22830 Foresthill Road, Foresthill, CA 95631
(530) 367-2224
TDD: (530) 367-2226
Truckee Ranger District Office
9646 Donner Pass Road, Truckee, CA 96161
(530) 587-3558
TDD: (530) 587-6907

Eldorado National Forest
www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado/
Eldorado Information Center
3070 Camino Heights Drive, Camino CA 95709
(916) 644-6048
Eldorado National Forest Supervisor's Office
100 Forni Road, Placerville, CA 95667
(916) 622-5061
Georgetown Ranger District Office
Georgetown, CA 95634
(916) 333-4312
Pacific Ranger District Office
Pollock Pines, CA 95726
(916) 644-2349

Auburn State Recreation Area
www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=502
501 El Dorado Street
Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 885-4527 (Main Office)
(530) 823-4162 (Whitewater Recreation)
(530) 885-4527 (Mammoth Bar OHV Area)

For More Information Visit or Contact:

Placer County Visitors Bureau - California Welcome Center
1103 High Street, Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 887-2111 or (866) 752-2371
www.visitplacer.com

Auburn Chamber of Commerce
1103 High Street, Suite 100, Auburn, CA 95603
(530) 885-5616
www.auburnchamber.net

Foresthill Divide Chamber of Commerce
24470 Main Ste. #B, PO Box 346, Foresthill, CA 95631
(530) 367-2474
www.foresthillchamber.org

Divide Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 34, Garden Valley, CA 95633
www.dividechamber.com

Or these Websites
www.placer.ca.gov
www.placercountyhistoricalsociety.org
www.auburn.ca.gov
www.oldtownauburnca.com
www.adventurelooptour.com
www.historichwy49.com
www.gdrd.org
www.fs.usda.gov/tahoe/
www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado/
www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=502

What to do in Case of an Emergency

Cell phone coverage in the Watershed is unreliable. Some campgrounds have hosts who can contact emergency personnel by radio. In the event of an emergency first call 911. If you do not get a phone signal, flag down help on the road or in a campground. Sutter Auburn Faith Hospital in Auburn is the nearest hospital - (530) 888-4500.