

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers

A Primer

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What is a Partnership Wild and Scenic River?

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to preserve certain rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers (PWSRs) are Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSRs) that flow primarily through non-federal lands and are jointly managed by the National Park Service and local, state, and regional stakeholders. Unlike traditional WSRs, where the river is managed by the federal agency(s) that own the land surrounding it, management of PWSRs is locally led and driven by municipalities, state agencies, non-profits, and land managers. With all models of WSRs, though, designation aims to protect and enhance river values, such as free-flow, water quality, biodiversity, cultural resources, and more.



Mark Meyer

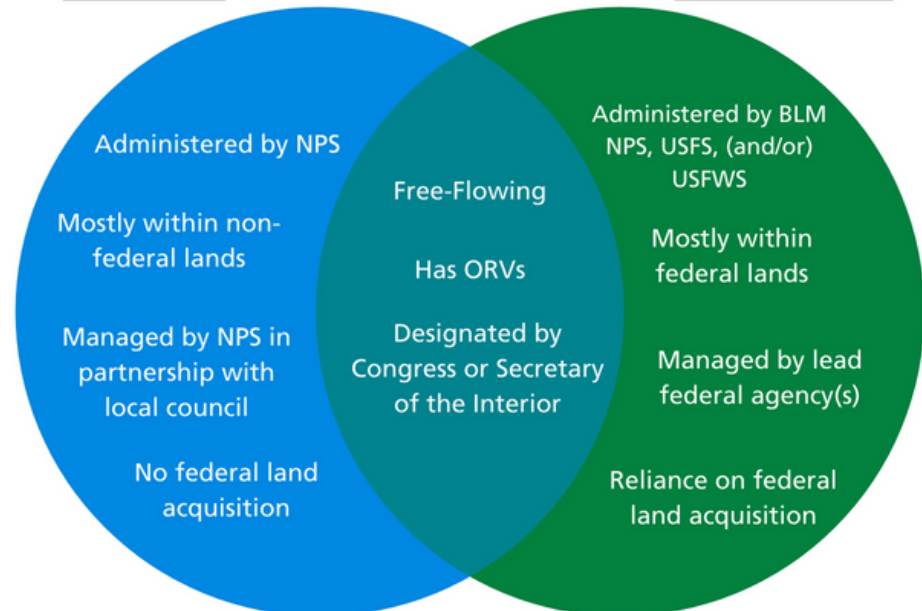
Delaware River, NJ/PA

In traditional WSRs, the lead agency develops a river management plan, typically after designation, identifying river values and other aspects of the river that management will protect. After identifying these values, the lead agency, often with support and input from other relevant stakeholders, will implement the river management plan through specific actions or projects. PWSRs, on the other hand, are administered slightly differently – while management is still targeted at specific river values, the management plan is typically created prior to designation by local stakeholders, who tailor the plan to the communities' values and needs. After designation, the National Park Service (NPS) and a local council, comprised of representatives from municipalities along the designated section of river, as well as local, state, regional, and national partners, jointly coordinate the management plan's implementation.

For PWSRs, NPS's role is more limited than it is on traditional WSRs. On PWSRs, NPS provides technical and financial support, as appropriated by Congress, without federal ownership or development of facilities. Additionally, traditional WSRs allow for federal land acquisition (with limitations), while PWSRs do not. With a traditional WSR, federal land acquisition is permissible for the purpose of protecting the designated river. For PWSRs, NPS is not authorized to own or manage lands under authority of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act; however, the PWSR model does not preclude federal ownership through other authorities. PWSRs rely on local zoning ordinances and other mechanisms to protect and enhance primarily mixed, non-federal land ownership.

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers

Traditional Wild and Scenic Rivers



History

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was established following a period of widespread dam building and hydroelectric development. By the 1950s, decades of dam building, development, and diversion had altered the country's rivers. During the 1960s, the country began to recognize the damage inflicted on rivers and their wildlife, landscape, and water quality. This led Congress to enact the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 to preserve the values, water quality, and free-flowing nature of our treasured waterways.

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System protects and enhances rivers that flow through non-federal as well as federal land, administered by one or more of four federal land managing agencies: Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and NPS. In 1995, these agencies established the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council to improve interagency coordination of WSR administration.



Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers



Great Egg Harbor River, NJ

By the late twentieth century, it was becoming evident that Wild and Scenic designations within large blocks of public land in the West did not work as well in the East, given the higher frequency of mixed land ownership. Early Wild and Scenic studies found some northeastern rivers unsuitable for designation in part because there was no clear mechanism for protecting national river values on private lands without federal acquisition and management.

At the same time, there was some tension in the Northeast between local communities and federal agencies managing existing WSRs. While federal agencies owned and managed some land along the rivers, there was a growing desire from nearby communities to be involved in the planning and management processes. Many people were concerned that national designation would equate to federal land acquisition.

After some attempts to address these concerns, the PWSR model was first put into practice in 1992 with what is now widely recognized as the first PWSR, the Great Egg Harbor River (NJ). The Great Egg Harbor River partners worked with NPS to develop a management plan that continues to rely on local partnerships, a local management council, and NPS to guide implementation of the plan goals.



York River, ME

Since 1992, many more WSRs have been designated with this model, largely in the Northeast. This approach has proven to be an effective alternative to exclusive federal administration, providing national river protection through a collaborative approach where communities play an essential role to protect their unique rivers and its resources. A more in-depth review of this history may be found in [Volume 25, Number 2 \(2008\) of The George Wright Forum](#).

Although they have a different management model, PWSRs share the same goals and attributes as traditional WSRs – they are free-flowing rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values. To become designated into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, all rivers must meet certain eligibility and suitability requirements.

Eligibility

In order to be eligible for designation into the national system, a river must be free-flowing and possess one or more outstandingly remarkable values.

Free-Flowing

A river or river segment is considered free flowing if it is **“existing or flowing in a natural condition without impoundment, diversion, straightening, rip-rapping, or other modification of the waterway.”** Though, “the existence of low dam, diversion works, or other minor structures at the time any river is proposed for inclusion ... shall not automatically bar its consideration.”

Outstandingly Remarkable Values

Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) are **river-related values that are rare, unique, or an exemplary feature at a regional or national scale.** This may include scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values within the study area.

Not all river reaches in the study area need to support all noted outstanding values, but these values must:

- Be located in the river or on its immediate shorelands
- Contribute substantially to the functioning of the river ecosystem
- Owe their location or existence to the presence of the river



The Nashua, Squannacook, and Nissitissit Rivers have an ecological ORV due to the rare species in the river corridor, such as the Blanding’s turtle, river otter, bald eagle, and more.



The Farmington River in CT holds a recreational ORV, with about 125,000 visitors a year!



The Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Rivers have a historical ORV, as the Shot Heard ‘Round the World took place on the Old North Bridge, crossing the Concord River.

Suitability and Classifications

Suitability

After determining if a river is eligible, the next step is to determine if it's suitable. Rivers are suitable if their free-flowing character, water quality, and ORVs can successfully be protected through WSR designation, and that designation is found to be the best method for protection. This is typically determined with an analysis of existing local, state, federal regulatory and non-regulatory protections. With PWSRs, community support for designation is often key to its suitability. This may be demonstrated in several different ways, depending on the local governance in the communities within which designation is being studied.

For all WSRs, these questions determine suitability:

- Should the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and ORVs be protected, or are there other conflicting uses?
- Will the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and ORVs be protected through WSR designation? Is designation the best method for protecting the river corridor?
- Is there a demonstrated commitment to protect the river by any non-federal entities that may be partially responsible for implementing protective management?

For PWSRs, NPS has developed and refined additional questions:

- Are existing protection measures adequate to conserve the river's outstanding resources without the need for federal land acquisition or federal land management?
- Is there an existing or proposed management framework that will bring the key river interests together to work toward the ongoing protection of the river?
- What local support exists for river protection and national designation?
- What would the effects of designation be on uses of the adjacent land, resources associated with the river, the neighboring communities, etc.?

Classifications

Every WSR, including PWSRs, is assigned a classification at the time of designation as wild, scenic, or recreational based on the amount of development and access along the river. These classifications function as a baseline so that the managing agencies and stakeholders can protect and enhance the rivers in the condition at which they are classified. These classifications are defined as follows:



Wild

Wild: Generally inaccessible except by trail, with watersheds/shorelines essentially primitive and waters unpolluted



Scenic

Scenic: Largely primitive and undeveloped, but accessible in places by roads



Recreational

Recreational: Readily accessible by road or railroad, some development along shorelines, and may have undergone some impoundment or diversion



Designation Process

Proponent explores PWSRs, discusses with NPS

The first step is to explore PWSRs to determine if it would be a good fit for river protection and management. Here, the proponent researches PWSRs, discusses options with regional NPS office staff, and gauges community support. While conducting research, it is helpful to document community support for the next step towards designation. For an in depth description of this step, visit the [Explore page of the PWSR toolkit](#).

Proponent requests WSR Study authorization from Congress

Then, typically, a proponent will request Congress to authorize a Study to formally evaluate a river's eligibility and suitability. During this process, conversations with local congressional representatives are helpful, along with providing any documented community support. This step is covered in the [Explore page of the PWSR toolkit](#).

Study Committee and NPS conduct Study and develop Management Plan

After a WSR Study is authorized, a local study committee is formed, usually consisting of municipal representatives, local stakeholders, and state, tribal, and federal representatives. The study committee will create a management plan which develops recommendations about how to best manage and protect the river. Additionally, the study committee will conduct outreach to gauge how designation will impact the community. Concurrently, NPS prepares a study report, determining whether the river is eligible and suitable for designation. To learn more about this step, visit the [Study page of the PWSR toolkit](#).

DOI Secretary and NPS provides report and Plan to Congress

After the management plan and study report are completed, the Department of the Interior (DOI) Secretary and NPS transmit these two documents to Congress for their consideration.

Congress designates the river

If Congress decides to designate the river, this process moves to the next step. If Congress decides not to designate, the management plan can still be used by the river communities as a roadmap for implementing other types of river protection strategies. Recommendations from the plan can be voluntarily implemented by area residents, riverfront landowners, local municipalities, and state, tribal, and federal agencies to help protect the river values identified during the Study.

Stewardship Council coordinates implementation of Management Plan

Once a river is designated, a local river council is formed to coordinate the implementation of the management plan. Implementation is often accomplished through projects such as water quality monitoring, community grants, outreach and education, land protection, and more. For more examples of implementation, visit the [Designate page of the PWSR toolkit](#).

What does designation provide?

- A local river council that:
 - Coordinates the implementation of the management plan
 - Provides a forum for the community to discuss and guide future management
 - Protects and enhances free-flow, water quality, and ORVs
- Support from NPS, which provide:
 - Technical assistance and access to agency resources
 - Funding as appropriated by Congress
 - Review of federally assisted water resources projects (bridges, culverts, etc.)
- National recognition and prestige in the community, often leading to economic lift in the area
- Ability to be more competitive for grant applications for the council and partners, and opportunities for additional external funding



Concord River, MA

Resources

Hundreds of river miles have been protected since designation of the first PWSR and it continues to be a successful method for river conservation and management. There are many resources that provide more detail about PWSRs. Visit a designated river's webpage through the [NPS PWSR page](#) or check out the following links for more information.



Wekiva River, FL

Wild and Scenic Rivers

- [National Wild and Scenic Rivers System website](#)
- [Wild and Scenic Rivers Act](#)
- [NPS YouTube playlist: Wild and Scenic Rivers](#)

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers

- [Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers \(NPS site\)](#)
- [PWSR Toolkit](#)
- [River Connections: PWSR video](#)
- [History of Wild and Scenic Rivers: George Wright Forum Article](#)
- [Regional NPS PWSR Contacts](#)

Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers and Study Rivers



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Congress specifies that some Wild and Scenic River designations are to be administered by the National Park Service in partnership with local governments, councils, watershed groups, and non-governmental organizations. These 'Partnership' Wild and Scenic Rivers and their outstanding river-related resources are jointly protected by stakeholders, generally through the use of cooperative agreements.