

Eligibility and Suitability

What's the Difference?

The Wild and Scenic Rivers evaluation is a two-part process made up of eligibility and suitability phases.

Eligibility

As described in sections 1(b) and 2(b) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 (WSR Act), to be eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (NWSRS), a river must meet two criteria. It must:

1. Be free-flowing; and
2. Possess one or more outstandingly remarkable value (ORV) that is river-related.

The determination of eligibility is an assessment that does not require a decision or approval document, although the results need to be documented as part of the land management planning process.

After a river segment is determined to be eligible for inclusion in the NWSRS it is given a tentative classification as either wild, scenic, or recreational. These classifications do not represent values associated with the segment but rather the condition of the river and the adjacent lands at the time of the study. For example, a segment need not have a recreational ORV to be classified as recreational.

Suitability

A suitability study provides the basis for determining which rivers to recommend to Congress as potential additions to the NWSRS. Suitability is designed to answer these three questions:

1. Should the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values be protected, or are one or more other uses important enough to warrant doing otherwise?
2. Will the river's free-flowing character, water quality, and outstandingly remarkable values be protected through designation? Is designation the best method for protecting the river corridor? In answering these questions, the benefits and impacts of wild and scenic river designation must be evaluated and alternative protection methods be considered.
3. Is there a demonstrated commitment to protect the river by any nonfederal entities that may be partially responsible for implementing protective management?

The WSR Act provides factors that should be documented and considered as a basis for a suitability determination. Once a segment is determined suitable it can be recommended to Congress that it be made part of the NWSRS. A determination of suitable does not automatically qualify the segment as part of the NWSRS. Only Congress can make an official designation.

Until Congress acts on a suitable segment, the segment is protected under interim management to protect the free-flowing character and the ORVs. If Congress makes a decision that a segment should not be part of the NWSRS it is dropped from interim protective management.