



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

## Forest Plan Revision Tongass National Forest



# Wild and Scenic River Eligibility Study

## Frequently Asked Questions

As part of the Tongass land management plan revision process, the Forest Service must review rivers and streams for their potential eligibility for designation in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System as directed under section 5(d)(1) of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 (PL 90- 542:16 USC 1271-1287, as amended) and the Forest Service Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vi)).

River and stream segments can only be designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers by Congress. However, Congress can base such designations on recommendations from a federal land management agency after they have completed an eligibility study, a suitability study, and a decision by the Responsible Official to recommend a river for designation. This handout describes the first of these processes – the eligibility study.

### What makes a river eligible for potential designation into the Wild and Scenic River System?

To be eligible for potential inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, a river or stream must be “free-flowing” and have at least one “outstandingly remarkable value” (ORV).

For the purpose of this eligibility study, free-flowing rivers and streams are those that exist or flow in a natural condition without impoundment, diversion, straightening, riprapping, or other modification of the

waterway. The existence of low water dams, diversion works, or other minor structures does not bar its consideration, but future construction of these structures could adversely affect a river’s potential for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

ORVs are those significant river-dependent features that are unique, rare, or exemplary on a regional or national scale. These river values owe their existence to the presence of the river, are located in the river or within a half-mile of the river’s shorelines, and contribute substantially to the functioning of the river ecosystem.

Categories of ORVs include recreational, scenic, geological, fish, wildlife, historical, cultural, and other similar river values.



## Are there any designated Wild and Scenic Rivers currently on the Tongass National Forest?

There are currently no designated National Wild and Scenic Rivers in the Tongass National Forest. However, 31 river and stream segments were found eligible, suitable, and were recommended for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System by the Regional Forester in 1997. Interim protective measures remain in place on these rivers until Congress makes a decision whether or not to designate them.

## What are the Eligibility Study Steps?

### Step 1: Identify named, free-flowing rivers.

We created a preliminary inventory of all named rivers and stream segments shown within the Alaska National Hydrological Dataset (NHD) on the Tongass National Forest. Using best available information, we noted locations of dams, diversions, or past and historic uses that may impact the river's free-flowing condition. This initial inventory resulted in **3,327.5 miles** across **774** rivers and streams to evaluate.

### Step 2: Establish a framework to evaluate outstandingly remarkable value criteria.

The intent of the eligibility study is to identify rivers that have one or more outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs). To do so, we compare rivers within a geographic area to each other so as to identify just those rivers with unique, rare, or exemplary river-related values. The geographic area used to compare rivers is called a “region of comparison,” which can vary by river resource. For example, while we might compare river-related cultural resource values to the State, fish values might be compared using ecological areas within the Tongass National Forest.

**The proposed regions of comparison** for each resource were developed on a resource-by-resource basis and vary. These proposed regions will support meaningful evaluation of potential eligibility as they will ensure an accurate representation of truly unique, rare, and exemplary river values. Proposed regions of comparison are as follows:

- Recreation – Southeast Alaska
- Scenic – Tongass National Forest
- Geology – Tongass NF Land Type Association
- Fish – Alaska Audubon Biogeographic Provinces
- Wildlife – Alaska Audubon Biogeographic Provinces
- Historic and Cultural – Nationwide and State of Alaska

### Step 3: Evaluate rivers and streams for ORVs.

An interdisciplinary team will evaluate each of the free-flowing rivers and streams inventoried in **Step 1** to determine if they possess at least one outstandingly remarkable value as described in the evaluation framework established in **Step 2**. The determination that a river area does or does not contain one or more outstandingly remarkable values is a professional judgment on the part of the Forest supervisor as informed by an interdisciplinary team, best available scientific information, and public participation.

### Step 4: Determine potential classification: wild, scenic, and/or recreational.

Rivers that are free-flowing and that possess one or more outstandingly remarkable value are considered eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. A finding of eligibility does not constitute a designation of wild and scenic river status to any waterway.

Each river and stream found to be eligible must be assigned a preliminary classification. The preliminary classification is based on the condition of the river or stream and the development level of adjacent lands as they exist at the time of the study. There are three classification categories for eligible rivers: wild, scenic, and recreational. Wild rivers are generally inaccessible except by trail with watersheds and shorelines essentially primitive and undeveloped. Recreational rivers are readily accessible by road or railroad and may have developments along their shorelines. Scenic rivers fall in the middle of that spectrum. If the river is designated by Congress, a final classification will be assigned.

### Step 5: Document findings and interim protections for eligible rivers and streams.

Location descriptions, maps, potential segment classifications, and narratives of ORVs will be developed for each eligible river and stream and included in an appendix in the Environmental Impact Statement associated with the revised land management plan. Rivers determined to be eligible must have interim protection measures, and these will be included in the Revised Tongass Land Management Plan itself. These protection measures apply until a decision is made on the future use of the river and the adjacent lands through a suitability study or an act of Congress.

## How can the public be involved?

The Tongass National Forest is committed to involving the public in transparent, meaningful dialogue to shape a plan that results in the sustainable management of resources, goods, and services. Forest Service staff will outreach broadly to engage federal and state agencies, tribes, local governments, communities, private landowners, and other interested individuals and groups.

For more information or to sign up for our email distribution list, please refer to the Tongass Revision Website:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/tongass/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd1105492>

## What are the rivers that were previously studied included on the inventory maps when they are not included in this study?

Rivers that have previously been studied are included on the inventory maps to show which specific rivers have been previously studied and will not be re-studied unless they have changed circumstances.

## How would fish enhancement infrastructure or fish traps be viewed under wild and scenic designation?

Rivers, or segments of rivers, found eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will be managed to protect their free-flowing character, outstandingly remarkable value(s) identified in the eligibility study, and the preliminary classification (wild, scenic, or recreational) of each segment and its associated corridor (the land within one half mile of each river bank's ordinary high water mark). Depending on the outstandingly remarkable values and preliminary classification, this could include developments to enhance or protect fish and wildlife. Construction of minor structures to protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitat could be included within a river or river segment but must include an evaluation of the potential for the project to affect the free-flowing character of the river and the effect of the project on the outstandingly remarkable values.

## Why has Congress not designated any of the 31 rivers recommended as suitable for designation?

There is no timeline or requirement for Congress to act on rivers recommended for designation.



## What happens if a river is determined eligible as wild and scenic?

Rivers, or segments of rivers, found eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will be managed to protect their free-flowing character, outstandingly remarkable value(s) identified in the eligibility study, and the preliminary classification (wild, scenic, or recreational) of each segment and its associated corridor (the land within one half mile of each river bank's ordinary high water mark). Specific "Interim Protection Measures" are required by Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 80 and will be included in the revised Tongass Land Management Plan. Interim Protection Measures may include rights-of-way limitations and/or development restrictions, depending on the outstandingly remarkable values and preliminary classification, as described in Chapter 80.

## Are wild and scenic river corridors appropriate adjacent to Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act conveyed lands, Native Allotment trust lands, or State of Alaska lands?

Management restrictions, if any, would apply only to federal lands within the river corridor. Rivers, or segments of rivers, on Federal lands found eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will be managed to protect their free-flowing character, outstandingly remarkable value(s), and the preliminary classification (wild, scenic, or recreational) of each segment and its associated corridor (the land within one half mile of each river bank's ordinary high water mark). Lands that are not managed by the USFS and lands outside of this corridor will not be managed to protect Wild and Scenic River status.

## **How would wild and scenic river status impact the Admiralty Island Canoe Route?**

Rivers, or segments of rivers, found eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System will be managed to protect their free-flowing character, outstandingly remarkable value(s), and the preliminary classification (wild, scenic, or recreational) of each segment and its associated corridor (the land within one half mile of each river bank's ordinary high water mark). Rivers with recreation outstandingly remarkable values will be managed to protect those values.