

Merced Integrated Regional Water Management Implementation Grant Proposal



Appendix 7-19

News Articles Related to Merced River Fatalities and
Rescues



Tuesday, Aug. 07, 2012

Girl who drowned in Merced River identified

By VICTOR A. PATTON
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BALLICO -- A 6-year-old girl who apparently drowned Sunday afternoon in the Merced River has been identified by the Merced County Coroner's Office as Kairi Sanchez of San Pablo in the Bay Area.

At the time Kairi went missing Sunday, officials had reported she was 7 years old, although her age was updated Monday.

Kairi had been visiting the McConnell State Recreation Area with her parents and family.

The last time Kairi was seen, she had been wading in the river. The Merced County sheriff's helicopter spotted her body, which was submerged about 30 yards from where she went missing, according to Ranger Denis Poole of the state's Department of Parks and Recreation.

Officials said the death appears to have been an accidental drowning.

Although the area where Kairi was wading is relatively shallow, Poole said the body was found in "one of the deeper holes" in the river.

"There were a lot of people in the water at the time," Poole said. "Somehow they lost track of her."

The girl's parents immediately notified rangers when she went missing about 3 p.m. Deputies were dispatched, and the department's helicopter, search and rescue personnel, and dive team arrived to assist in the search.

Three hours later, Kairi's body was found. An autopsy was conducted Monday, and the results will be available later this week.

Poole said life jackets should be worn by those who go near the water, particularly children.

The drowning was the third time in less than a month that sheriff's deputies responded to the Merced River because of a report of a missing person. In the two prior incidents, those who went missing were located hours later, alive and unhurt.

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Tuesday, Jul. 17, 2012

Caution on Merced River emphasized

Missing canoeists found safe

By VICTOR A. PATTON
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SNELLING -- Friends and family members of two canoeists who went missing on the Merced River breathed a sigh of relief Monday morning after the pair were found safe by Merced County sheriff's deputies.

The canoeists, a 31-year-old woman and a 17-year-old boy, had left Henderson Park near Snelling about 7:30 p.m. Sunday and had arranged to meet friends at a bridge near Shaffer and Oakdale roads, just north of Winton, according to Deputy Tom MacKenzie.

When the pair didn't show up, their friends became concerned and notified law enforcement at 12:30 a.m. Monday. Deputies looked for the pair, but halted the search after several hours.

Deputies resumed the search at 6:30 a.m. Monday and the department's Huey helicopter eventually spotted them about 8 a.m. near Highway 59 and the Merced River near Hopeton.

Sheriff's officials said the pair did the right thing by pulling over their canoe, rather than continuing in the water, in the dark.

Still, officials say the case underscores the importance of water safety on the river.

Sheriff Mark Pazin said incidents on the Merced River tend to increase during the hot summer months, particularly if visitors fail to take proper precautions.

Case in point, one year ago sheriff's deputies and Merced Irrigation District officials closed a section of the river near Snelling after a June 30 rescue that spanned more than 10 hours.

During that ordeal, several members of law enforcement needed to be rescued after their boat capsized in the swift water upstream from Snelling. The following day, nearly a dozen more people required rescuing by law enforcement.

Pazin said his department hopes to avoid a repeat of last year's river closure.

"If people continue to be so cavalier and have total disregard for themselves and their friends, I will be talking to Merced Irrigation District and we collectively will shut down access to the river," Pazin said.

Mike Jensen, MID spokesman, said the water in the Merced River near Snelling is flowing about 220 cubic feet per second.

People should avoid rafting, swimming or inner-tubing in the Merced River, Pazin said, particularly because the water can be high and swift. The water is also cold, with an undertow, lots of brush and rocks beneath the surface.

"Even if you are a reasonable swimmer, that river is still wide," Pazin said.

Those who visit the river should do so in areas properly designated for water recreation, such as Henderson Park.

"I just don't advocate floating down the Merced River at all. It's dangerous and bad things can happen very quickly, as evidenced by this weekend," Pazin said.

Those who use the county's waterways, including experts, should make sure they have the proper safety equipment. Those who bring children should give undivided attention near water, whether it's a lake, pool or river.

Officials say people, particularly children, should avoid swimming in canals, which can be dangerous. Children can get free vouchers for the McNamara Pool by contacting the United Way, Jensen said.

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Be safe

Avoid rafting, swimming or inner-tubing in the Merced River. The water can be high, swift, and cold, with an undertow, lots of brush and rocks beneath the surface.

If you visit, use only areas properly designated for water recreation, such as Henderson Park.

Make sure you have the proper safety equipment.

Give children undivided attention.



Merced Sun-Star

MARCI

STENBERG/mstenberg@mercedsunstar.com
 Four-year-old, Jonathan Madrigal, right, tosses rocks into the Merced River, as two-year-old Alina Madrigal, back right, Matthew Madrigal, 2, back left, and Alina Madrigal, 4-years-old play around on the innertube in the Merced River, Monday, (07-16-2012) afternoon in Henderson Park in Snelling, Ca. Merced County Sheriff's deputies found two Merced River rafters Monday who'd been missing for 12 hours. Deputies are reminding rafters and those on the river to be safe.





Friday, Jul. 01, 2011

Merced River closed after string of rescues

Officials forced to shut down access after fast-moving river puts too many in danger.

By VICTOR A. PATTON
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SNELLING -- After several river rescues over the past two days, officials from the Merced Irrigation District and Merced County Sheriff's Department say they're closing access to the Merced River east of Henderson Park for the next 10 days.

Among the incidents was a tense operation Thursday night and early Friday in which a rescue boat flipped, tossing deputies and teens they had just saved into the water. They were marooned on an island for hours until they were pulled to safety.

Later Friday, even more incidents were reported, spurring officials to clamp down on river access.

"We have attempted a vigorous education and public outreach campaign to warn people of the dangers of the high, fast, cold flowing rivers," said MID General Manager John Sweigard. "However, it has become abundantly clear that we must take extreme measures for the time being."

Merced County Sheriff Mark Pazin said the conditions create an "extremely dangerous situation."

"We are going to make sure we have taken every possible step to prevent a drowning or serious injury during this dangerous time along the river," he said.

Access to the river will be closed through July 10 under order of the MID, the district said in a statement.

The closure decision came Friday after 10 people were rescued near Henderson Park in Snelling; they had become stuck in the middle of the river during a float trip. They had been warned by deputies to avoid the water, but the group of rafters and inner-tubers ignored the warnings, said sheriff's spokesman Tom MacKenzie. Deputies helped pull them out of the water when they became stuck about 200 yards downstream from where they started, MacKenzie said. No one was injured.

Earlier Friday, a woman had to be pulled from the water after getting stranded.

Those rescues came hours after two incidents Thursday evening in which several people had to be rescued.

The incidents led to the river access closure. Deputies will watch the river and signs will be posted to discourage people from rafting or swimming, said Sgt. Jason Goins.

"If anyone is caught in the water, they will be asked to leave," he said. "If they refuse to leave, then they will be subject to arrest. We are just looking out for the safety of everyone."

Thursday's rescues began in the afternoon, when Merced deputies received calls about 3 p.m. that two unrelated groups had fallen into the river.

In one incident, a raft overturned and two people made it to shore, according to MacKenzie. The sheriff's helicopter responded and picked up the two rafters.

The other incident was filled with more tension, though no one was hurt.

About a mile from the first rescue, three teens floating on inner tubes became stranded after getting stuck in trees. Merced deputies responded and pulled the teens aboard a boat. But the boat shut down when the engine sucked in debris.

The boat drifted and hit a tree. Water came over the edge and the boat flipped onto its side.

Three Merced deputies, a Mariposa deputy and the three teens were dumped into the water and marooned on a small island of trees and brush in the middle of the river for several hours.

Dozens of volunteers with the Merced and Mariposa Search and Rescue teams arrived to help.

About 11:45 p.m., the teams tied a rope to a raft and pulled the stranded people, one by one, to shore, starting with the teens. The final deputy was pulled to shore on a kick-board tied to a rope about 1:30 a.m. Friday.

Pazin, watching from shore, breathed a deep sigh of relief after the last person was pulled to safety.

The incidents show why people should stay away from the county's waterways, Pazin said.

"People are not paying attention. The water is cold, it's swift," he said. "The hot weather is melting all the snowpack. And we have warned everybody repeatedly: Do not get near this treacherous water. Nothing good comes of it."

Mariposa County Sheriff Doug Binnewies also expressed relief no one was hurt.

"With this high runoff that we're experiencing throughout the state, we really ask the public to be cautious," Binnewies said. "When they inadvertently step into harm's way, it really puts a lot of professionals at risk."

Mark Recasens, one of the rescued teens, was the one who called 911 after he and his friends got stuck.

"We were in the trees for about, maybe almost two hours, by the time someone came and got us," the 17-year-old Atwater High student said, still shivering from the cold water. "I was in the water for maybe like half an hour, and then climbed into the tree that was closest to me, and tried not to get swept up in the current."

MacKenzie said that when people who are not trained or equipped for rafting it puts rescue personnel at risk when they have to save them.

"If you are not a strong swimmer or have children nearby, waterways are an extremely dangerous place to spend the holiday," MacKenzie said.

Also responding were Fresno County sheriff's deputies in their helicopter; firefighters from Cal Fire; and California Highway Patrol officers, who directed traffic around the area.

The MID statement said warning signs will be posted in English, Spanish and Hmong along the Merced River near Snelling at access points maintained by the MID. On July 10, the safety of the river will be re-evaluated, the MID said.

Samuel Cosby contributed to this report.

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Friday, Jul. 01, 2011

MID issues strong warning to stay out of local dangerous waters

Sun-Star Staff

The Merced Irrigation District statement:

For the past couple of months – and especially the past few weeks – Merced Irrigation District has done absolutely everything possible to inform the community of the dangers of cold, high, swift moving streams and rivers that have resulted from increased snowpack and a late spring runoff.

Unfortunately, yesterday several people put themselves in significant jeopardy by entering the Merced River under these very dangerous conditions. As a result, the lives of local emergency responders and law enforcement were also put in significant jeopardy as they were forced to conduct a rescue in these extremely dangerous conditions. We are grateful this incident did not come to a disastrous end.

We are again restating as directly as we possibly can: stay out of the Merced and other rivers, and stay out of irrigation canals. The water is cold, moving fast, and can carry away even the strongest swimmer. There is absolutely no reason for anyone to be near the Merced or any other river at this time. We do not want to see one more single incident such as happened on the Merced River yesterday.

For the past two weeks MID has had radio announcements running that warn of the dangers of high-flowing rivers. The District also proactively requested that the local newspaper write a public service article about the dangers of high flowing rivers. That article was published last Friday, June 24. Additionally MID recently worked to have the month of May declared Water and Canal Safety Month in Merced County. The declaration coincided with a public education campaign about the dangers of water and canals. MID staff spoke directly to school-age children, ran media ads, hosted a water safety day, conducted a water safety poster contest and handed out hundreds of children's life jackets.



Thursday, Jun. 30, 2011

Deputies rescue five people from Merced River, near Snelling

Sun-Star staff

SNELLING -- Merced and Mariposa County Sheriff's deputies pulled five people from the swift, frigid waters of the Merced River late Thursday evening and early Friday morning near Henderson Park, during a more than 10-hour operation filled with many tense moments.

The operation began Thursday afternoon when Merced County Sheriff's deputies received calls around 3 p.m. about two separate groups of people who'd fallen into the river in unrelated incidents. No one was hurt.

In the first incident, a raft overturned on the river and two people made it to shore, according to Deputy Tom MacKenzie, sheriff's spokesman. The sheriff's Huey helicopter had responded to the scene, and picked up the two rafters.

Meanwhile, about a mile away, three teenage males who'd been floating down the river on inner-tubes became stranded after getting stuck in trees on the water. Merced County Sheriff's deputies responded and pulled the teens aboard a boat. But the sheriff's boat shut down after the engine sucked in debris.

The boat drifted back and hit a tree. Water came over edge, and boat went over on its side. As a result, three Merced County Sheriff's deputies, a Mariposa sheriff's deputy and the three teens were dumped back into the water and marooned on a small island of trees and brush in the middle of the river.

Dozens of volunteers with the Merced and Mariposa Search and Rescue teams arrived to assist deputies. Around 11:45 p.m. the teams tied a rope to a raft, and one-by-one pulled each stranded person to shore, starting with the teens. The final deputy was pulled to shore on a kick-board tied to a rope around 1:30 a.m. Friday.

Pazin, who watched from shore during the late night rescue, breathed a huge sigh of relief after the last deputy was pulled to safety.

The incidents exemplify why people should to stay away from the county's waterways, Pazin said. "People are not paying attention. The water is cold, it's swift," he said. "The hot weather is melting all the snow pack. And we have warned everybody repeatedly: Do not get near this treacherous water. Nothing good comes of it."

Mariposa County Sheriff Doug Binnewies also expressed relief no one was hurt during the challenging situation. He hopes the public will take note about the dangers of being on the water. "With this high runoff that we're experiencing throughout the state, we really ask the public to be cautious," Binnewies said. "When they inadvertently step into harms way, it really put a lot of professionals at risk."

Mark Recasens, one of the teens rescued by the deputies, called 911 after he and his friends had become stuck in trees on the river. "We were in the trees for about, maybe almost two hours, by the time someone came and got us," the 17-year-old Atwater High student said, shivering from being in the cold water. "I was in the water, for maybe like a half an hour, and then climbed into the tree that was closest to me, and tried not to get swept up in the current."

Fresno County Sheriff's deputies also responded in their helicopter. Firefighters from CalFire also responded along with California Highway Patrol officers, who directed traffic around the area.



Monday, May. 23, 2011

Rafters rescued from Merced River

Two people were rescued Sunday evening from the Merced River near the Cressey Bridge after getting hung up on a tree while rafting down the river.

The dive team from the Merced County Sheriff's Department executed the rescue, said Deputy Tom MacKenzie, sheriff's spokesman.

Four people were using a raft designed for a swimming pool rather than strong river currents, he said.

After getting stuck, two of the rafters were able to swim to shore, MacKenzie said. The other two remained snagged on the tree in the middle of the river.

When the sheriff's dive team arrived, MacKenzie said, and with the support of safety lines, they were able to rescue the two stranded rafters.

The rescue took about 20 minutes, MacKenzie said. No one was injured. -- *Mike North*

Monday, Jun. 07, 2010

Group rescued after losing raft in Merced River, spending night on riverbank

SNELLING -- Four rafters who spent the night on an isolated bank of the Merced River near Snelling were rescued by the Merced County Sheriff's Department on Monday morning.

Sheriff's Deputy Ed Katen said the rafters entered the river from Henderson Park on Sunday afternoon, but soon lost their raft when it overturned in the water. The group made it to the opposite side of the river, but couldn't get back across, Katen said. "The water is too dangerous, so they spent the night on the island," Katen said. Family members reported them missing when they didn't return home Sunday night.

Merced County search-and-rescue team members began searching early Monday morning. The group was spotted by an aircraft during the search. Rescuers entered the river at a bank about three miles east of their location, and guided the rafters home along the riverbank.

Sheriff Mark Pazin said rafters and others need to be mindful of water safety, particularly this time of year. Pazin also mentioned two drownings were reported this weekend in Fresno and Madera counties. "The waters are just treacherous this time of year with the runoff. The current is very swift and the water is very cold," Pazin said. "Fortunately all four people did not drown."

The rafters are family members, two of them from Winton and two from San Jose. The group included a 34-year-old man and three women, ages 21, 24 and 29.

Katen said the group was inexperienced at rafting, and they weren't wearing lifejackets. They suffered some bumps and scratches, but rescuers didn't observe any major health problems, Katen said.

The Merced River is swollen with spring runoff from the Sierra, meaning the cold water is running high and fast, Katen said.

-- *Brandon Bowers*



Merced Sun-Star

SUN-STAR PHOTO BY MARCI STENBERG Three young men fight the current on the Merced River while trying to paddle up stream, as they pass Henderson Park in Snelling on Monday, June 7, 2010 afternoon. The river is quite swollen and swift due to the melting snow in the mountains.



Wednesday, Jun. 24, 2009

Emergency rescue by the Merced River

Good Samaritan helps responders find dehydrated man.

By VICTOR A. PATTON

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Paramedics and Merced County sheriff's deputies responded to the Merced River, about a mile east of Snelling Road on Tuesday, to assist a man suffering from dehydration.

Deputies responded to the scene around 3:30 p.m., thanks to the efforts of a Good Samaritan who stopped to help the man, according to Tom MacKenzie, sheriff's spokesman.

Deputies haven't released the victim's name.

MacKenzie said the man, a 46-year-old dressed in full camouflage fatigues, was walking in the area Tuesday morning and was unable to walk further after becoming dehydrated and exhausted.

Around 2:30 p.m., 26-year-old Matt Hutchings of Merced was floating down the river on an inner tube with his girlfriend Julie Lee, 23, and Amanda Moua, 23, both of Merced. Hutchings and his friends heard the man's calls for help.

Hutchings found the man about 100 yards away from the bank. He waited with the man, while Moua and Lee went back to Snelling Road to flag down a driver, who called 911.

The deputies and paramedics then hiked to the spot where Hutchings and the man were located. At press time, the man was being treated and was in stable condition.

MacKenzie commended the actions of Hutchings and his friends for stopping and helping the man in need. Without Hutchings' actions, MacKenzie said deputies might not have ever found out about the sick man. "(Hutchings) went above and beyond the call," MacKenzie said.

The man had been sitting in heavy brush and rocks for more than four hours, before Hutchings was finally able to locate him, MacKenzie said.

MacKenzie said it's unknown why the man was near the river, wearing fatigues.

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Merced Sun-Star

SUN-STAR PHOTO BY MARCI STENBERG Merced County Search and Rescue team, along with Sheriff's Deputies and a civilian Matthew Scott Hutchings of Merced, rescued a 46-year-old white male, who was severely dehydrated, along the Merced River, Tuesday, June 23, 2009 afternoon .



Tuesday, Sep. 04, 2012

Teens' trip on raft ends with river rescue

Deputy: Injuries include dehydration, twisted ankle

By VICTOR A. PATTON
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SNELLING -- Six teenagers were rescued from a rural area south of Henderson Park in Snelling on Sunday after they became lost while rafting on the Merced River, the Merced County Sheriff's Department reported.

Deputy Tom MacKenzie, sheriff's spokesman, said the teens had been on the river with rafts typically made for swimming pools. The waters eventually became too treacherous for the teens to navigate, forcing them to pull to the side of the river.

The group, who are 13 and older, were able to call 911 with a cell phone, but their location was remote and inaccessible from roads, MacKenzie said.

The sheriff's helicopter, dive team, search and rescue team, and patrol responded to the scene. The teens were located after the helicopter spotted the rafts tied up on the river. Because of the remote location, deputies had to hike a long distance through thick vegetation and walk out with the group.

MacKenzie said the teens, who'd been gone for several hours, suffered minor injuries including a twisted ankle and dehydration, but were otherwise in good condition.

Sunday's incident is one of several reported this summer on the Merced River.

Since July, Merced County sheriff's deputies have responded to the river numerous times after visitors have gone missing.

"Just because it looks calm, don't take the water for granted," MacKenzie said. "If you don't know where you're going or you're not skilled in navigation, anybody can get lost out there."

While those who go missing on the river are usually found safe, deaths have been reported this summer. On Aug. 15, Jacob Adams, 6, was wading in the river in Yosemite National Park with his 10-year-old brother Andy and their mother when the boys were swept downstream. Another visitor pulled Andy from the river shortly after the boys fell in, but resuscitation efforts were unsuccessful. Searchers found Jacob's body days later.

On Aug. 5, 6-year-old Kairi Sanchez drowned in the river in McConnell State Recreation Area while wading in an area with other family members nearby. Authorities said the part of the river she was in is shallow, but she apparently stepped into a deep hole and vanished without anyone noticing right away.

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