

Mobilizing for a River:

The Ebb and Flow of Power in the Los Angeles River Movement

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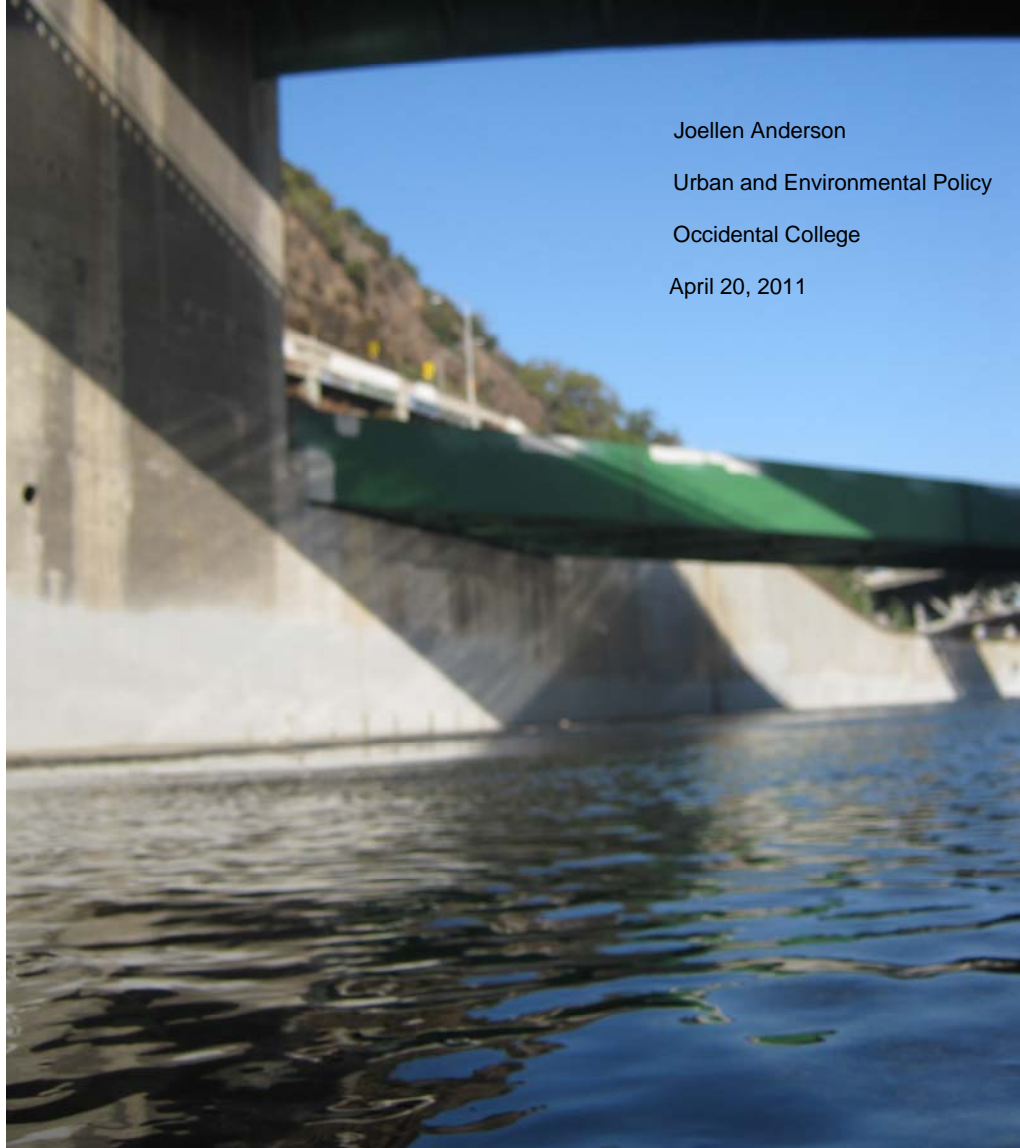


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1. Executive Summary

The 52 mile-long Los Angeles River runs through the heart of the city; from Glendale through Downtown and into Long Beach. Unfortunately, though the city of Los Angeles was founded at its banks and relied on its water for many years, it has long been forgotten and scorned by Angelenos. This is primarily because since the 1930s it hasn't looked anything like a river; the majority of its length is encased in concrete on three sides and cannot support any riparian habitat. The concrete was originally laid down by the Army Corps of Engineers in response to a number of large floods which destroyed property and infrastructure in the city.

Left forgotten since its channelization in the 30s, the river became a dangerous place and a hotbed for crime. Its notoriety only came from its use as a backdrop for Hollywood films (remember the drag race in Grease?). That is, until the mid 1980s when Lewis MacAdams, a poet and activist, rediscovered the river and began to advocate for its release from the concrete, for the redevelopment of its ecology, and for public access to it. Other organizations and individuals have also contributed to the movement through the years including those giving tours of the river, kayaking in the river, and working within the government to change the policy surrounding it.

In this paper I examine the backgrounds, strategies, and future plans of the organizations and individuals working in a non-governmental fashion to advocate for the river. Next, I give a brief outline of all the government agencies which have jurisdiction over some part of the river or which work to implement the Los Angeles River Master Plan. I then reflect on the perspectives of each of the individuals I talked to who work outside the government about the river movement as a whole; what strategies they think are important, what could make the movement more effective, and what makes the Los Angeles River different and important. Finally, I conclude by detailing what I feel are important ideas to take from this look at the movement and give recommendations for the future.

2. Glossary of Organizations, Individuals, and Government Agencies

- ❖ **The Los Angeles River Movement:** The collective group of individuals and organizations working on revitalization efforts at the Los Angeles River. This includes but is not limited to working to provide public access to the river, restore riparian habitat, connect communities to the river, increase park space in the river corridor, and promote recreational business usage.
- ❖ **The Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR):** A non-profit organization established in 1986 by Lewis MacAdams with the mission to “to protect and restore the natural and historic heritage of the Los Angeles River and its riparian habitat through inclusive planning, education and wise stewardship”.ⁱ
- ❖ **Lewis MacAdams:** Poet and activist. Founder and leader of The Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR). One of the first activists to begin pushing for revitalization of the Los Angeles River post-channelization.
- ❖ **Jenny Price:** Freelance writer and activist. Leads tours of the Los Angeles River, both with FoLAR and independently, with the goal of public education.
- ❖ **George Wolfe:** Kayaker and “unwitting activist.” Helped organize and led the 2008 kayak expedition down the Los Angeles River to provide evidence of the river’s navigability to the Environmental Protection Agency.
- ❖ **Heather Wylie:** Former Army Corps of Engineers biologist responsible for the enforcement of section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Became a whistleblower by prompting the 2008 kayak expedition and maintaining contact with the EPA while they made their decision regarding the navigability of the Los Angeles River.
- ❖ **Joe Linton:** Activist and blogger. First introduced to the river through his work in the Los Angeles biking community. Maintains the blog “LA Creek Freaks” which gives details on current activity surrounding rivers in and around Los Angeles.
- ❖ **The Los Angeles River Master Plan:** Document spearheaded by the City of Los Angeles which outlines a general plan of action for river revitalization. The implementation of this plan is central to the activity of many government agencies focused on the river.
- ❖ **The Ad-Hoc River Committee:** Committee primarily consisting of city council members with the main goal of implementing the Los Angeles River Master Plan.
- ❖ **The Army Corps of Engineering:** Federal Agency responsible for the design and construction of the Los Angeles River channel in the 1930s. Maintain portions of the channel over which they have jurisdiction and may responsible for financially backing some projects in the riverbed.
- ❖ **The City of Los Angeles Department of Public Works-** City department which is “responsible for the construction, renovation, and operation of the City’s facilities and infrastructure. The Department builds the City’s streets, installs its sewers and storm drains, and constructs public buildings and service facilities.”ⁱⁱ
- ❖ **The County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works-** Agency “responsible for the design, construction, operation, maintenance, and repair of roads, bridges, airports, sewers, water supply, flood control, water quality, and water conservation facilities and for the design and construction of capital projects” in the County of Los Angeles.ⁱⁱⁱ

- ❖ **The River Cooperation Committee:** Committee formed by officials from the City and County, with an advisor from an Army Corps official. Designed to recommend river projects, recommend projects pending changes, or not recommend projects while in their beginning stages. Recommendations are based on projects' compliance with the goals of the Los Angeles River Master Plan.
- ❖ **The Urban & Environmental Policy Institute:** Academic institute at Occidental College geared towards "creat[ing] a more just, livable, and democratic region." Responsible for co-hosting (with Friends of the Los Angeles River) the 1999 Series on the Los Angeles River; a year-long set of events focused on river revitalization.^{iv}

3. An Introduction to the River: Its History and the Beginnings of a Movement

The Los Angeles River runs through the heart of LA, starting in the San Fernando Valley, crossing through Glendale, passing by downtown, and finally cutting South to flow into the San Pedro Bay. Despite this conspicuous path most people don't even know the river exists, probably because the river doesn't really look like a river at all. Of the 51 miles of the Los Angeles River, 38.7 miles (78%) are encased in concrete on three sides. The channels range from 12-35 feet deep and 60-600 feet wide depending on their location.^v The wide expanse of concrete holds little water for most of the year, only a small notch in the center of the channel rushes a small stream of water and debris away from the city and into the ocean. In a satirical Los Angeles Times series on the Los Angeles River, Dick Roraback even went so far as to describe the river as "oozing out to sea".^{vi}

But the river hasn't always looked this way. Before the Spanish colonization in the 1700s it sustained several Native American communities of the Tongva tribe.^{vii} The river was small and often flowed underground, but its banks were coated with trees and shrubs, its waters full of fish, and it was home to many species of birds. The river and its tributaries crisscrossed all over an alluvial plain, in what is now the greater Los Angeles area, creating marshes and pools.^{viii} The first written account of the river dates to 1769 when Father Juan Crespí, a Spaniard, described the river's banks as "grassy and covered with fragrant herbs and watercress".^{ix}

This lush and fertile land was perfect for agricultural development, and the small Spanish colony which began in the late 1700s grew to become the most productive agricultural county in the United States up to the 1950s. Los Angeles was originally founded by Spain to provide food for the missions and presidios of Southern California. The original settlers were commissioned by the Spanish government to develop an irrigation system and begin growing food to sell at a fair price to the presidios. The Pueblo gained self-sufficiency by 1786 and was steadily weaned off of Spanish financial support. Through the heavy exploitation of Native American labor, the Los Angeles settlement became the highest producing

mission with the exception of San Gabriel and by the early 1800s was the most vital agricultural resource on the west coast of the Americas. Los Angeles remained an agricultural town with slow growth for its first century but became an increasingly popular site for visiting and settling after the state of California was acquired by the United States in 1848. The water from the river enabled the town to maintain a reputation as a garden in the middle of an arid dustbowl.^x

However, because of the shallow and marshy nature of the original river and its tributaries, the large torrents of water which would run from the mountains during the infrequent and heavy rains would overflow the banks of the river and flood these communities and industry which had grown up nearby.^{xi} Every 10-20 years a large flood would take a particularly devastating toll on the city.^{xii} A witness to the 1884 floods said, "Widely overflowing its banks, [the river] sweeps away real estate and personal property in a most merciless fashion".^{xiii} The river whipped across the landscape frequently; in floods it could change its path by as much as 90 degrees.^{xiv}

The gold rush of 1848 began to steer the town of Los Angeles towards becoming the city of today. The town became a supply and trade center for the huge influx of people looking for their fortunes. In response, Los Angeles had to develop its infrastructure to sustain their numbers. The river's water became a limited resource, often spurring crime in competition for access to it. The city began to tax the water supply and enforce regulations on water usage in an attempt to control the demands for more water. Land worth was highly dependent on access to the river and irrigation ditches, and the city managed to restrict access to the water for only Los Angeles in order to prevent communities farther North from putting more pressure on the supply. Soon residential and industrial development began to replace the agriculture as more people moved to the city, and the burgeoning population put so much pressure on the water supply that areas which at one time had year-round water completely dried up.^{xv}

The transcontinental railroad sealed the fate of the Los Angeles River as it brought more and more people into Southern California. The population of Los Angeles County, which was 33,881 in 1880, swelled to 101,454 in just ten years. In 1890, the city alone had a population of 50,395 people. The increased domestic demand for water eventually swallowed up the agricultural land around Los Angeles as it slowly became more financially feasible to sell the land for housing rather than grow anything on it. During the drought of 1897-1900, rainfall was 28.5 percent lower than normal and in 1904 the city's reservoirs contained less than a two days' water supply.^{xvi}

Finally, the city decided that the local water supply simply couldn't sustain the ever-increasing population. In 1905 city officials approved the first of many plans to bring water in from outside of Los Angeles, starting with an aqueduct from the Owens Valley.^{xvii} This first project was announced in a Los Angeles Times article with the headline, "Titanic Project to Give City a River" which stated, "Now the Water Commissioners hold options on the flow of dozens of streams, each of which is considerably larger than the Los Angeles River".^{xviii} Though it remained a source of water for the city for many years, already the city's river began to be marginalized in the face of promising alternate water supplies.

The Los Angeles River was highly valued as an economic resource but seldom seen as a recreational or aesthetic asset to the city. The increasing industrial development lining the banks began dumping their waste and the river held no role in transportation of goods or in producing power. Unfortunately it became the dumping ground for a variety of things including animal carcasses, tar, oil, and rubbish. Because the river remained dry many homeless people and squatters lived in the riverbed despite the risk of floods. The river was also used as a gravel quarry by the industry which had spread along its banks. The city tried to control uses of the river by implementing laws, including prohibiting people from living in the bed and prohibiting dumping "market refuse and rubbish", but to little avail. The city itself refused to follow these laws when their dump began overflowing into the river. The low flow rates

in the river concentrated pollutants so the river became toxic and contaminated ground water supplies.^{xix}

Even in these early days before the concrete channelization of the river there was a small outcry to begin revitalizing and protecting the river. Dana Bartlett, a settlement house worker and minister who moved to Los Angeles in 1896, said, "Despite the fact that its banks are lined with factories and the river bed itself is sought by utilitarian corporations... [the river could be] made into a line of beauty". Others, like planner Charles Mulford Robinson of New York, thought that it could be integrated into a Los Angeles improvement plan by clearing the trash and lining the river with trees. Unfortunately none of these projects gained widespread support. One member of the Park Commissioners Board even said, "It would be expensive and difficult, if not impossible, ever to make the river bed a thing of beauty...but it is not necessary to have it so ugly and unsanitary".^{xx}

An attempt to make the river a beautiful, usable resource came out of the Chamber of Commerce in 1930. They commissioned Harlan Bartholomew and Fredrick Law Olmsted to do a study to examine the feasibility of a parkway along the river; which would not only provide green space for Angelenos but also double as a flood control zone to prevent the disastrous flood damage seen in rainy years. Unfortunately, because of the heavy urban development which included not only homes but also rail lines and industry, there was no cost-effective way of obtaining the land for a buffer to line the river and the plan was forgotten for nearly seventy years.^{xxi}

By 1947 the pollution of the river had reached such a critical point that government officials from the state, county, and city gathered to solve the growing problem. In 1948, they created the Los Angeles River Pollution Committee which established standards for waste discharge and began a program of water quality testing. The committee claimed after only one year, fifteen different industries' toxic wastes had been eliminated from the river. Unfortunately, although the risk to ground water supplies was reduced, pollution in the river remained a persistent problem. The Los Angeles

Department of Water and Power stopped pumping water along the river and eliminated its last remaining surface diversion in the early 1980s.^{xxii}

From before the turn of the century, flood control projects began attempting to prevent the damage caused by flash flooding. Levees had been built, fencing erected, and the course of the river straightened. The bed had been excavated in many areas and all plant life removed in order to move water through its course as quickly as possible. However this was still not enough to protect the city from the frequent floods which destroyed property and claimed lives on a regular basis. In 1914 Los Angeles experienced a flood which spurred the channelization of the river.^{xxiii} A Los Angeles Times article claimed that the city would be “a laggard -something that she has never been in the past- if ample preparations [were] not made to prevent a repetition of the flood”.^{xxiv} The city first attempted to take care of the flood problems on their own, but residents were unwilling to pay for the extensive projects which would actually control the vast amounts of water that could pass through the channel. In the 1930s after two more disastrous floods, the national government took over and sent the Army Corps of Engineers to design a system which would prevent further damage by floodwaters.^{xxv} This system is the river as we know it today; 51 miles of concrete, a glorified storm drain running through the center of the city.

The city of Los Angeles requested government assistance for the project under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act with an estimated price of the entire project at \$15 million. In 1935 Franklin D. Roosevelt approved \$13.9 million for the Works Progress Administration to begin working on flood control for fourteen of the most urgent projects. The next year another \$3 million was allocated to the channelization. These projects employed nearly seventeen thousand people, 95 percent of whom were part of the WPA relief rolls created by the government to pull the U.S. out of the Great Depression. The development along the sides of the river restricted its banks so much that the Army Corps was given little room to construct a functional method of flood control.^{xxvi} Other plans which called for open space

to be used as a buffer, parks, and a soft bottom, like the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan of 1930, were not feasible because of the residential and industrial building lining the river.^{xxvii} To handle the copious amounts of water which rush through the narrow river channel during floods, the Army Corps relied heavily on widened, reinforced concrete channels which were paved on three sides.^{xxviii} In the end, only three sections of the river maintained a natural bottom.^{xxix} After several decades of construction and countless projects, \$116.7 million was spent on the Army Corps' flood control projects on the main channel of the river.^{xxx} The downstream channel (past the Glendale Narrows) is mostly trapezoidal in shape while the upstream is rectangular. The downstream volume capacity also far exceeds that of the upstream stretches.^{xxxi} In the first true test of the new flood control system, Los Angeles was hit by record rains in 1969 which could only be expected to occur once every 150 years. The city received 13.3 inches of rain and the LA River had a flow of 102,000 cubic feet per second of water. Despite this, the new flood control projects held strong and prevented an estimated \$1 billion dollars in damage. Even still, these projects failed to account for the exponential growth which Los Angeles has experienced in the last 50 years.^{xxxii} Los Angeles, it appears, is doomed to continually restructure its flood control in order to deal with increasing runoff.

The post-channelization river is almost completely devoid of the plant and animal life which it used to sustain, even in the three sections which have an unpaved bottom. Six of the seven native fish species of the Los Angeles River, four of the six species of frogs, seven snake varieties, and the one turtle species which lived in the river no longer exist there. At least four bird species which fed and nested along the river no longer do so, including the yellow-billed cuckoo and Swainson's hawk. Cottonwoods and willows no longer grow along the banks, the marshes which once sustained waterfowl and fish have dried up, and the fast flow sweeps most fish out to sea. Only one native species of fish still swims in the main channel of the river, the arroyo chub, and they are few. Large mammals no longer visit the river,

their habitat adjacent is completely eradicated and there are no small mammals or sizable fish to catch anyway.^{xxxiii}

The channelization of the river also sealed it off from the communities which it ran through. Fencing and barbed wire surround it and signs declare it off limits. The channel is so dangerous in flooding that the Department of Public Works and the Office of Education in Los Angeles produced an educational video entitled *No Way Out* which combines "dramatic footage" and "stirring personal accounts" about the dangers in the flood control channels.^{xxxiv} The river has become a scary, difficult to reach place. The walls are lined with graffiti and despite trespassing laws the channel is frequented by vagrants, drug addicts, gangs, and homeless people. Garbage, waste, and refuse frequently can be found floating down in the narrow notch of water or littering the sides of the channel. River front residents and developers turned their backs on the river for many years, demanding that it be concealed from view with walls, and never considering entering it.^{xxxv}

For fifty years, the river was largely ignored or feared by Angelenos who crossed back and forth over its waters without a second thought. That is, until Lewis MacAdams noticed the concrete channel. MacAdams was born in Texas and moved to Northern California after college. A poet and writer, he was involved in water politics in Bolinas for a number of years before moving to Los Angeles in 1980 to write screenplays. However, he had to take other jobs to sustain himself through his writing. He began writing for the magazine *Wet* and worked as a laborer for a program renovating lofts east of downtown when he first saw the river. He was immediately struck by its unusual appearance and intrigued by its derelict nature. Five years later, MacAdams was presented with the opportunity to write about issues in Los Angeles and also to perform for the Museum of Contemporary Art. He chose to do both focusing on the Los Angeles River, a decision which set in motion the fledgling LA River Movement.^{xxxvi} MacAdams planned his performance in two stages, the first being a trespass into the river's channel. He and three friends (Pat Patterson, Roger Wong, and Fred Fischer) cut through the fencing and entered the river to

ask if they might speak for it in the “human realm”. The intent of this first “performance” was to inspire action and begin to open the river to Los Angeles once more. The second performance, called “Friends of the Los Angeles River” took place later that same night in a small theater.^{xxxvii} Patterson, a sculptor, created a large totem made from river driftwood for the stage. MacAdams painted himself green and wore a white suit to represent William Mulholland, Los Angeles’ famous engineer who had advocated for the river in the late 1800s. He gave a monologue in the character of Mulholland, impersonated animals of the Los Angeles River, and finally led a question and answer session about river revival. The reviews were less than complementary.^{xxxviii} One critic in the LA Times said, “With friends like these...the river needs no enemies”.^{xxxix} MacAdams, however, was not deterred. He and his fellow performers took the small amount they were paid for the performance and created bumper stickers with “Friends of the LA River” printed on them. A few weeks later he gathered a small group to walk along the river, some carrying homemade signs. The next year Friends of the LA River (or FoLAR) was officially incorporated as a non-profit.^{xl}

Around this same time, others in Los Angeles were also beginning to notice the river flowing through their midst. Dick Roraback, a writer for the Los Angeles Times, journeyed from the river’s mouth to find its source, satirically emulating great historical expeditions such as those to map the Amazon and Nile Rivers.^{xli} The eleven-part, three month series was widely read and although it did not call for any action, it cast light on a part of Los Angeles which most people had never noticed.^{xlii} Many readers sent in letters in response, even Lewis MacAdams who, despite criticizing Roraback’s tone, sent in a “Friends of the LA River” bumpersticker.^{xliii}

Another interested party, Dilara El-Assaad, began to focus on the Los Angeles River in the mid-Eighties. El-Assaad, an agricultural engineer and architect, was in graduate school at the University of Southern California when she first saw the Los Angeles River. She was struck by its unusual appearance like many before, but was one of few people who considered the concrete channel and bridges to be

beautiful. As her master's thesis, she developed a plan to bring the Los Angeles River back into the lives of Angelenos in a report titled "Redefining the Role of the L.A. River in the Urban Landscape of Southern California". Her thesis, though not published, catapulted her into the world of river development which was growing at the time. She was a speaker at one of the early conferences centered around revitalizing the river, discussed her ideas with congressmen and assemblymen, and presented her proposals to the state Commission of Parks and Recreation. In 1992 she contributed to the planning department's response to an Army Corps plan for further flood control construction. When the city finally drafted a revitalization plan for the Los Angeles River, El-Assaad was on the team which developed it.^{xliv}

With the growing attention given to the this and other urban rivers across the country, national conservation organizations such as the Sierra Club and American Rivers as well as local groups like Heal the Bay and Northeast Trees have become involved in river restoration. Although initially resistant, governmental agencies such as the Department of Public Works have even developed plans to make the riverside accessible for human use. A plethora of plans were proposed over the years with varying ideas on how the river should be used.^{xlv} Through all of the proposals, Friends of the LA River has stayed central to the fight for revitalization. They were still a small, unheard of organization for many years, until the late 1980s. In 1984, the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant north of Sepulveda Dam began to discharge their water directly into the river channel, creating a continuous flow in the river. This increased vegetation and animal life in the unpaved portions of the river, strengthening FoLAR's argument that this was a true river.^{xlvi} Additionally, a loud public debate in 1989 over a proposal to turn the LA River into a freeway launched FoLAR into the spotlight.^{xlvii} Finally, a proposal by the Army Corps and Public Works to raise the channel walls on a large portion of the river sparked intense controversy over how the river should be viewed.^{xlviii} FoLAR filed a lawsuit against the Department of Public Works which, although FoLAR lost the case, resulted in the creation of the most recent, Los Angeles River Master Plan as well as the Watershed Council, an entity controlled by Public Works.^{xlix} The only other

lawsuit FoLAR ever filed was done so in tandem with the organization TreePeople, to decide the fate of the Taylor Yard and Cornfield sites, both of which are now riverside parks (interview 2 Lewis).ⁱ

While the Army Corps continued to treat the river as a flood control channel, environmental groups envisioned a plan which involved pulling up the concrete where feasible and using parkland to control flooding like in the Olmsted-Bartholomew study, which was reprinted in 2000 under the title “Eden by Design”.ⁱⁱ It even boiled down to the language used to refer to the river. In a confrontation between Public Works official Jim Noyes and Lewis MacAdams, each time Noyes referred to the “flood control channel” MacAdams would interrupt with the word “river”.ⁱⁱⁱ Although language may seem trivial, the discrepancy between the Army Corps’ and Public Works’ treatment of the river and how environmental and community groups wish it to be seen is central to the movement surrounding it.

But even the groups working on river issues have diverged in their visualization of a revitalized river. MacAdams and FoLAR remained concentrated on watershed management and bringing back at least some of the original ecological features of the river until more recently as they have added public outreach and education to their priorities list.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Blake Gumprecht, author of the book “The Los Angeles River”, claimed in 1999, “They are the most uncompromising in their approach. They are the people most likely to stand in front of bulldozers, confront construction crews, or file lawsuits”. They have not, however, attempted to distance themselves from the more mainstream efforts to build bike paths and parks along the river. In an interview with Gumprecht, MacAdams explained, “The larger the constituency for the river, the better off we are”. However he also vented his frustrations, “What has happened is that all these other groups have taken on important issues which are much easier to deal with, leaving us with the hard stuff”. FoLAR for many years had been pegged as the “radical” group and were often excluded from important meetings and park dedications, a fact which can make voicing opinions and promoting a cause extremely difficult. Others, like landscape architect and city planner Cynthia D’Agosta, could not see restoration as a possibility because of the infrastructure already in

place. Her approach is human-centered, focusing on parkland, open space, and connecting communities, like the River Master Plan which focuses solely on parkland, says nothing about water management or flood control, and in the end gives no one the power or money to follow through. However people like D'Agosta believe that the plan is valuable because it has started a new level of discussion.^{liv}

To launch such a discussion about the Los Angeles River, Lewis MacAdams and Friends of the LA River teamed up with Occidental College's Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI) with a series of events in 1999 and 2000. The series, called "Re-envisioning the Los Angeles River" focused on variety of issues the movement was facing, the discourse surrounding the river and how it had changed over the years.^{lv} The series consisted of "over forty lectures, forums, art installations, poetry readings and other events" including river walks and bike-rides all designed to capture "the historical, cultural, political, community, environmental, and engineering perspectives about the evolution of the L.A. River."^{lvi} The events were directed not only towards the College's students, but to community members and government officials.

The series began with a volunteer cleanup project involving thirty incoming first-year students in order to introduce them to the river and activism. Then a month later, the series' featured its first official speakers: the President of Occidental College, the head of EPA district 9, and the Secretary of the California Resources Agency. That same month, UEPI and FoLAR continued with a panel on Flood Control in the LA Basin at the LA River center which discussed different strategies for removing concrete in portions of the river. The panel attracted over seventy attendees, including "community members from the Tujunga Wash area, agency staff, watershed management advocates, and students and faculty from Caltech and Occidental". Next came the first of the many "Bike Along the LA River" tours designed to demonstrate that the River can be used as a major biking corridor. The first of the bike tours attracted over 150 bikers of all levels, and this and the subsequent rides set in motion the advocacy

movement for biking along the river. Inspired by the same idea as the bike tours (that people who go to the river and experience it as something tangible are more likely to advocate for it), River walks became another reoccurring event in the series. In tandem with the Sierra Club, these monthly walks focused on issues which were being discussed in other events of the series at the same time. In October 1999, Occidental College hosted a panel on the History of the Los Angeles River, not only to provide perspective on why the river has become what it is but also to celebrate the release of Blake Gumprecht's book "The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth" and the 70-year-later reprint of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan for a Los Angeles River Greenway. In March of 2000, Occidental hosted Andy Lipkis of TreePeople with a discussion of urban runoff and the importance of re-thinking water flow and watershed management, including landscaping as a means of water recapture.^{lvii}

The series also featured discussions on two of the main tributaries of the Los Angeles River, the San Gabriel River and Arroyo Seco Stream. These discussions consisted of panels and speakers talking about the importance of rethinking not only the Los Angeles River but the headwaters which flow into it. In May a group of panelists and speakers discussed the sources of pollution in the river, effects on the habitat, and efforts to reduce it. Soon after, yet another panel discussed restoration projects and studies on their impacts. With the co-sponsorship of the city of South Gate, the Re-envisioning series organized a forum discussing land-use along the river in gateway cities. The series also incorporated FoLAR's Annual River Cleanup into their programming. This was probably the largest event with over one thousand people gathering trash at multiple locations along the 52 mile stretch of the river. In April, the inauguration of Occidental's new president Theodore Mitchell was accompanied by a discussion of the need for community involvement. The River Series was the largest set of community-based events at Occidental College that year, and so it was featured in the inaugural proceedings with a panel and discussion on the role that Occidental could play in re-envisioning the river.^{lviii}

True to MacAdam's poetic side, many of the programs in the Los Angeles River Series focused on art as a means to have a conversation about the river. An event in November 1999 featured seven poets who each read their work reflecting on the river (both already written and commissioned for the event). The event had over seventy attendees including –like most events- students, community members, and river advocates. Literary reflections on the river were also represented in an exhibit called "The Ephemeral River" in Occidental's library. "Community voices about the River" took place throughout the second semester, and promoted student awareness about river issues by taking school groups to the river and encouraging artistic reflections on their experiences. That year the LA River Center and Garden opened after a community victory prevented the development of a Home Depot and Burger King on the property. The event included several speeches as well as a documentary screening and photography exhibit. Community members' art also was featured in the Eagle Rock Community Center, with 10 participating artists submitting their work on the river. More visual art projects of a wide variety of mediums came from Occidental's own students in an exhibit on Oxy's campus. Cinematic representations of the river that included a video montage of movies which had used the river and a panel discussing the imagery and adaptability of the river. This abundance of art-based programming all used the LA River as a centerpiece for creative exploration; however one program took that a step further and used the riverbed itself as an artistic medium. The "River Visions" program organized over fifty artists to create temporary installations in and around the riverbed which varied "from mural projects to performance art to gourd birds to aerial photography to treasure maps and historic stereoscopic views of the River."^{lix}

Finally, after a year of programming surrounding Los Angeles politics, ecology, community, and art, Occidental College culminated their Re-envisioning the River series by hosting a Mayoral Candidates Debate. The four candidates used the opportunity to answer questions and discuss their ideas about the urban environment and the future of the river. Questions were posed to each candidate by the

moderator as well as by audience members and covered topics such as the river's role in communities of Los Angeles and "policy, management, and social and cultural issues associated with it".^{lx}

The Re-envisioning Series' events gained more publicity for the Los Angeles movement in a short span of time than had been seen since the mid-1980s. This included radio coverage of multiple events such as the Mayoral Debate and opening event, articles in the LA Weekly, Daily News, and New Times, and coverage on cable TV.^{lxi} The ability of the River Series to synthesize all the different debates surrounding the river, the issues facing it, and the importance of the river to LA's future had a huge impact on the way the river movement was discussed. Although the more tangible results were important (like bringing bike and river advocates together to support a river bike path), the real value of the series came in the solidification of the new discourse about the river. Until that year, politicians, government officials, activists, and community members still frequently debated the idea that the river had potential for more than flood control. Though that same debate continues on, the Re-envisioning the LA River Series marked a major turning point in discussion from "Can the river be used?" to "How should the river be used?".^{lxii}

In the last ten years, individuals and organizations have taken a variety of approaches to answer that question; people such as Jenny Price, a freelance writer and activist who leads tours of the river to educate attendees about public access. Others have taken active and defiant approaches, like George Wolfe, who led a kayak expedition down the entire river in 2008 to prove its navigability. These groups working on a variety of goals for the river have created a dynamic movement with diverse strategies, and each brings something different to the table.

4. The Individuals and Organizations of the Los Angeles River Movement

The successes of the Los Angeles River Movement are largely due to a dedicated group of individuals and organizations outside of the government who have employed a variety of methods to benefit the river. Their inspirations, histories, current strategies, and future plans demonstrate the diversity of the group working on river revitalization. This section gives a general idea of the non-governmental activities and people which have brought the Los Angeles River Movement to where it is today.

Lewis MacAdams and the Friends of the Los Angeles

For more than twenty years Friends of the LA River (FoLAR) has remained one of the most influential non-governmental organizations working on river issues in Los Angeles. In its beginnings in the mid-80's, Lewis MacAdams fought for the river as an ecological resource; one of the group's early slogans was "When the steelhead trout return to the river, our work is done". The small group largely saw themselves as advocates for the river rather than for the people who lived along its concrete banks. Admirable though their cause may have been, FoLAR's early work was seen by most as a fool's errand.^{lxiii} The river was hidden and forgotten by Angelenos for so long that few could see it as more than a storm drain.

This early work with Friends of the Los Angeles River was directed towards changing people's perceptions of the water in their midst from a storm drain into a river in order to gain support for rehabilitating it as a reconstructed "natural" environment and restoring some properties of the riparian habitat. They organized kayaking trips down the river (not getting nearly as much notoriety as those which occurred in 2008) to demonstrate that this river could be used for recreation like any other.^{lxiv} Their actions had much of the same flavor as the one which started it all, cutting barbed wire, entering the river bed, and marching with signs.

Over time however, MacAdams has felt the river movement and FoLAR itself moving in an easier-to-swallow direction. He refers to it as the “apple pie-ing” of the river movement. First, FoLAR transitioned into working to create a Los Angeles River Greenway, much like the focus of Olmsted and Bartholomew, El-Asaad, and the River Master Plan. There is broad-based public support for riverside parks and paths which would constitute a greenway, and it seems to be widely supported by the city government as well as the Army Corps and County. As MacAdams said to me, it is easy to support restoring a river which is recognized as an asset (though it is much more difficult to put your money where your mouth is, as I discuss later). Most recently FoLAR has been fighting for public access to the river, making it a “swimmable, boat-able, fishable river”.^{lxv} Garnering government backing for public access is more complicated than for riverside recreation because of liability and risk; however the Army Corps and the City have shown that they are at least willing to discuss projects which allow citizens some access to the river.^{lxvi} Most recently, FoLAR has been pushing for the creation of a River Authority which would transcend the City, County, and Army Corps as the go-to office for all Los Angeles River Issues.^{lxvii}

The changing focus of the organization has resulted in an adaptation of its tactics and actions. Where in the beginning MacAdams and friends entered the concrete riverbed to declare the water a river, now they are bringing communities into the river with educational programs, clean ups, mural artwork (such as their large project at the Arroyo Seco confluence which was quickly painted over), and “trash sorts” in which they use random sampling of the garbage collected in the river to determine the source of the majority of the litter to produce a report (turns out, Frito Lay contributes 25% of the trash in the river).^{lxviii}

Additionally, Friends of the LA River has been involved in two lawsuits, numerous meetings with government officials, and participation in public meetings discussing the river.^{lxix} They regularly attend public forums organized by departments such as Public Works and the City of LA to advocate for the river. Occasionally MacAdams and the FoLAR leaders are invited to speak at meetings. For example, on

April 4, 2011 Lewis MacAdams was invited by the Department of Public Works River Cooperation Committee to speak on the importance of the river to gateway communities. FoLAR's presence at these meetings, whether invited or not, helps government officials to remember that the conversation on the river should not be limited to questions of drainage and flood control but should include the needs of citizens who want access to the resource in their midst.

No matter the strategy which the FoLAR crew employs, MacAdams emphasizes the need for symbolic meaning in their actions. Without symbolism, he says, their work means little to the public. FoLAR's advocacy, as he describes it, is all "poetry and politics" and has some larger meaning for the river and people around it. They also try to employ tactics which tackle many issues at once.^{lxx} For instance an educational action such as a cleanup could not only focus on the issue of ecological impact but also on public access and ownership of the river, or an advocate speaking at a government meeting could talk about intersecting issues facing the river. By bringing many issues to the table at once, the Friends of the LA River can utilize each opportunity to advocate for the river to the fullest.

The power of FoLAR's actions also greatly depends on the number of people who support them. Like most activist and grassroots organizations, FoLAR has begun to rely upon social media to cultivate a constituency. Although no formal surveying has been done to discover the background or motivation of FoLAR's volunteers, MacAdams says that when it comes to the LA River Cleanup (their largest event) volunteers appear to be diverse and the people in a group often vary depending on the site leaders; but most often the groups include students, environmentalists, families, and activists.^{lxxi}

With a larger constituency, Friends of the LA River could organize larger and more diverse events and actions. MacAdams says that FoLAR could go in many different directions, all of which would affect the future of the river. For now, they plan to increase the pressure to remove more concrete from the river bed in order to restore a healthy ecosystem to more than the three soft-bottomed sections of the river. Additionally, MacAdams plans to focus in on creating a Los Angeles River

Conservancy which would encompass not only Los Angeles but the Long Beach, Burbank, and Glendale sections of the river. Creating an agency which transcends city boundaries would give them more flexibility to implement large-scale projects along the river. Lastly, FoLAR wants to become more involved in the debate over the Piggyback Yard, a 125 acre area beside the middle of the Los Angeles River.^{lxxii}

Jenny Price

I was introduced to Jenny Price's work through my Urban & Environmental Policy classes at Occidental College. Jenny first became involved in the river movement as a freelance writer in 1999, a year after she moved to Los Angeles. She had been looking for something related to the urban environment to write about, and the activity with Friends of the Los Angeles River and the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute that year were picking up the speed of the river movement.^{lxxiii} She already knew several people involved in the series so she decided to focus on the river in her writing. She developed a "field guide" to the LA River which was printed in the LA Weekly that same year and also wrote a short piece on birding at the river.^{lxxiv} As she probed further she found that the activists in the river movement were disconnected, no one knew exactly what anyone else was doing. In 2001 she began to give tours with her friend Alan Lummis (an architect and urban designer) to friends who were curious about the river, but who had never seen it. The tours became popular within their circle, so they developed an email list of friends of friends and college groups, and began doing monthly walks with FoLAR. Her original goal in doing the tours was simply to show her friends what she had been talking about in her writing, but over time her tours have morphed into an opportunity for educating the public, a vitally important part of the movement. On the tours, she discusses the history of the river, the habitat which is lost as well as that which exists currently, and the movement to restore and provide access to the river. Like Lewis MacAdams, she believes getting people to the river and teaching them that it is a river are "the most effective way[s] to get people involved".^{lxxv}

To attract more people to the river, Jenny established a relationship with the group “Hidden LA” from facebook. The partnership brought in 500-600 people and they were having near weekly tours to accommodate everyone who was interested. However she has found that the Hidden LA constituency has mostly been tapped out now and she does fewer tours, some on her own and some with FoLAR. Although she has worked for FoLAR and with HiddenLA as well as with Joe Linton (a former FoLAR employee, bike activist, and river tour guide), Jenny works as a freelance writer, teacher, and consultant. Beyond educating tour attendees on river issues, Jenny says she also uses her role as a tour guide to connect people to Friends of the LA River and other work going on in the river movement like the LA River Master Plan. When people ask her how to get involved, she emphasizes the need for them not only to work with organizations, but also to return to the river and use it as their space.^{lxxvi}

Like FoLAR’s events, Jenny’s tours attract a diverse set of people for many different reasons. Often their interest in the tours is work related, such as with architects, writers, students, academics, water quality workers, or environmentalists. Some are people who have seen the river (for example bikers) but want to know more about what they see. Still others are just interested in utilizing the river but don’t know where to go.^{lxxvii}

The tours themselves have received little media coverage. Jenny has never asked reporters to be at the tours, however on occasion a writer will take it upon themselves to attend a tour and write about it. Generally, the tours get coverage in small scale publications like blogs and the Downtown News, and they have never been covered in the Los Angeles Times. The New York Times once sent a writer to attend a tour. The only people that Jenny has invited to tours are those who work for non-profits and planners to give them a good introduction to the river.^{lxxviii}

As part of the tour, Jenny Price leads her groups into the river bed at the Arroyo Seco confluence beneath the intersection of the 110 and I-5 freeways. Although this is technically trespassing, she says she has never been able to acquire permits to enter the channel. The Corps once issued her a letter in

response to her requests, however when she presented it to an LAPD officer who stopped her below the 6th Street bridge he told her that it meant virtually nothing. In 2005, Jenny received a call from “the courts” (I’m not sure which courts) in response to her brochure advertising the tours. She was informed that she could not enter the riverbed without a permit and given a phone number of an agency which, when she called, claimed they had no power to issue permits. Her tours also used to enter the river channel beneath the 6th Street Bridge, however in the summer of 2010 LAPD decided that no one should enter the channel there and now regularly patrol that entrance. For the last 60 years the Army Corps has claimed that they have jurisdiction over the 6th Street area, but more recently have turned it over to the city of Los Angeles. Unfortunately, according to Jenny the city has yet to take responsibility for it so she has been unable to get permission to go there. Generally, she finds that no matter how many people she talks to, everyone seems to have a different idea about who has the power over the river, and no one is willing to take responsibility for it. Although frustrating, this allows her tours to enter the river channel and they have been able to continue without hindrance.^{lxxix}

For the future, Jenny hopes to continue to lead tours and really begin to focus on public access. She considers this issue the next big battle for river advocates because, “[p]eople are sick and tired of being told they can’t go into the river. It’s ours, it belongs to us. If it belongs to the corps then it belongs to everybody. The corps is a public agency, so is the county, so is the city. People are really, really sick of being told that they can’t go into the river”.^{lxxx} The plans for park space and re-thinking the river channel as well as the navigability decision of 2008 (see corresponding section) have awakened the public’s desire to enter and use the river, and Jenny intends to fight for their right to do so.

Joe Linton

Joe Linton first encountered Friends of the LA River in 1993 at their presentation asking Long Beach residents to oppose an Army Corps and County Flood Control District project to raise the walls along the river.^{lxxxi} Joe would bike along the river on his way to work, and he admired FoLAR’s stance on

protecting an environmental resource so close and tangible to the people of Los Angeles.^{lxxxii} He also admired their enthusiasm for the cause, their creativity, and their call for radical change. He decided to volunteer with FoLAR and over time became integrated in the “Creek Freak” community. In 1998 he was invited to join the FoLAR board of directors. At the time, the main focus of the organization was simply trying to convince Angelenos that the river actually existed. Based on Lewis MacAdams’ and Jenny Price’s idea that in order to help the river people needed to visit it regularly, Joe began to give monthly “Down by the River” walks -much like Price’s tours- which he continues to this day.^{lxxxiii} Beyond leading biking, busing, driving, and walking tours, he helped organize FoLAR’s cleanups, gave workshops on rainwater capture, and “did a lot of advocacy around the city and county river plans, river and creek bike paths, [and] preservation of historic bridges”.^{lxxxiv} He also spent two years working as a council deputy for Los Angeles City Councilmember Ed Reyes, the current chair of the Ad-Hoc LA River Committee.^{lxxxv}

Although he currently is in neither a position with FoLAR nor with the City Council, Joe continues to advocate for the river through his blog “LA Creek Freaks”. He continues the blog because “the L.A. Creek Freak blog is an important piece of activism... [I]t gives [him] a tool to reach a wider audience and involve them in river efforts.”^{lxxxvi} The blog publishes articles on a wide-variety of topics like bike-paths, waterfront park space, policy decisions, news, and more. Though he keeps connected to new information about the river, still gives tours, and regularly attends river-related events (he participated in the kayak expedition of 2008), recently he has primarily focused on bike-related work in Los Angeles.^{lxxxvii} However the two spheres often overlap, as we saw in the UEPI river series.

The Los Angeles River Kayak Expeditions

In 2008 one of the most heralded events in the river movement took place. George Wolfe, a kayaker, led a group of boaters down the length of the entire Los Angeles River from its origin to the Long Beach estuary. George first encountered the river through one of Jenny Price’s river tours, and he

continued to explore it on his own with his kayak. A year before the renowned expedition, George led an unofficial tour with his friends, although they didn't travel the entire river channel length. While experimenting on the river, he started to brainstorm about how to get more people to the river and get total legal access to the river.^{lxxxviii} Just as he began to think about how he could open the river up to run recreational kayak tours he received a call from Heather Wylie, a biologist with the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of implementing Section 404 of the Clean Water Act which states that all "traditionally navigable waters" are protected under the act.^{lxxxix} Heather Wylie had seen a youtube video which George posted the year before, a satire about boating to work using the LA River.^{xc} She had been looking for any history of navigation on the river in order to challenge the Army Corps' decision to deny the navigability of the river.^{xc} To determine if a river is navigable, the Army Corps looks at recreational and commercial uses and potential uses of the river, the history of navigation, and current conditions such as flow rates and depth. The initial corps decision claimed that only about 3.75 miles of the river was navigable (Sepulveda and Long Beach estuary).^{xcii} George Wolfe's kayaking trips could be considered a recreational use of the river, and Heather got the feeling (based on his humorous video) that he would be willing to take a trip down the entire river to make a statement to the Army Corps and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).^{xciii}

In order to change the Army Corps' decision in regards to the river's navigability, the EPA had to make a "special case determination" with the Los Angeles River and produce their own navigability report which proves that the river could potentially sustain navigation.^{xciv} Heather Wylie hoped that if they could successfully tour the entire length of the river, the EPA would factor that trip into their decision about the river's navigability. Beyond that, she wanted to demonstrate that the current state of the Clean Water Act is "absurd" and that it is ridiculous that they would need to boat in a river to stop rollbacks on its protection. In order to successfully reach either of these goals, George and Heather needed to bring a lot of attention to the issue of river protection. Heather contacted the EPA before the

expedition, and kept them informed throughout the whole process.^{xcv} Additionally, she contacted various media sources before and after the expeditions in order to garner public support.^{xcvi} The media picked up the story quickly so George and Heather didn't have to try very hard to get a lot of coverage. They also didn't have to spin the expeditions as controversial to get more coverage; the media did it themselves by using phrases like, "sticking it to the Army Corps" and "defying the corps". There was some risk involved in controversial language because the expedition could not obtain permits from any government office (like many others, they were tossed between departments) except for a filming permit from the Army Corps. If they had decided to, LAPD could have used the media coverage to discover where the expedition was and pull them out of the water or arrest them for trespassing. However after the Los Angeles Times covered their story, there was no turning back from doing the expeditions. As George said, it took "nuance" to orchestrate the expedition without being immediately being removed from the channel. They had to enter the water in a section that was not very populated and that looked less restricted.^{xcvii}

Despite the obstacles faced even before the expedition was underway, George and Heather successfully navigated the entire 51 miles of the river with a group of 10-24 people (some joined for parts of the expedition while a few did the entire length). Like many events in the Los Angeles River movement, the group participating in the expedition came from diverse backgrounds and included doctors, comedians, environmentalists, activists, teachers, children, artists, and more. Midway through the expeditions, a few officers from LAPD stopped them but allowed them to continue when they presented the film permits: a testament to the lack of knowledge surrounding laws and enforcement in the river channel.^{xcviii}

After the completion of the expedition, Heather Wylie continued her contact with the EPA (particularly Henry Waxman, the chair of the House Oversight Committee) to ensure that they were working on the navigability decision. Additionally, she maintained contact with many national and local

environmental groups as well as the media in order to maintain the buzz around the expedition and upcoming decision. Even without the hullabaloo, many long-time EPA officials had a vested interest in upholding the law and even had “disdain” for some of the leaders in the Army Corps who “constantly battle over how the [Clean Water Act] is implemented”.^{xcix}

In fact, the expeditions were one of a variety of factors which influenced the EPA’s final decision about the navigability of the river. They mostly influenced the part of the decision based on the potential for recreational usage. The rest was based upon historical context of the river as well as research studies on capacity and flow rates. Although the fight for this declaration has been represented as long and controversial by many of the people I have talked to, Rob Leidy of the EPA said that they experienced no official complaints about the decision to retract the Army Corps’ decision. However, he did mention that there might have been some hard feelings with individuals in the Army Corps who don’t like when the EPA contradicts their decisions. When EPA made the initial decision to conduct the navigability study they contacted local public officials and community groups to let them know what they were doing and to solicit their input with any supporting information that they may have on the LA River. They heard a lot of positive support from the City of Los Angeles and also from community groups such as FoLAR (which was cited in the resulting navigability report). The participating non-profit groups provided useful technical information and also initiated a small letter writing campaign to EPA officials. The consequent decision was released to the public through a press release and media event at the riverside in Compton with Lisa Jackson and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa speaking on what it meant for the river and the city.^c

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For the EPA, it meant the end of their work on this decision. They are not responsible for pressuring the city or anyone else to implement projects or clean the river. The Clean Water Act calls for any tributaries of a Traditionally Navigable Water to be protected and regulates certain activities by local government (like dredging or discharging waste) in those waters. Largely, this decision was

symbolic, and highlighted the importance of the LA River and its tributaries by “emphasizing its value to the region”. Through this decision, the EPA delivered an overarching jurisdictional statement which supports restoration, but has no actual power to control how that is done. It is up to the local government offices to implement their master plans, and the City has its own ordinances and laws protecting the river.^{ci}

What this means for the individuals and organizations working for river restoration and access is that their work is far from over. Heather Wylie was influential in the navigability decision by linking up George Wolfe and the expeditions to the EPA officials who could make it happen, however after the navigability decision was announced she experienced a backlash from officials in the Army Corps to an extent which she did not anticipate. She said that she was prepared for some retaliation but, “[She] pulled the tail of the tiger and got them to do what [she] wanted by doing so, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt when they bite.” In December of 2008 she resigned from the corps. “The Corps is a branch of the military,” she said, “[and] unlike the rest of America [which] values being loyal to the public's greater interest in freedom of speech and upholding our greatest public trust law ([such as] the Clean Water Act) they value loyalty to following orders and chain of command, rank and file. [The Corps was] deeply embarrassed that one of their own showed, in a very public way, that they were wrong.” After her resignation, Heather coordinated with the travel channel on an educational documentary about the water supply crises in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles River. However, she says that her main involvement ended when she stopped her previous employer- Aaron Allen at the Army Corps of Engineers- from removing Clean Water Act jurisdiction over the Los Angeles watershed and she has no plans to continue with the river movement.^{ci}

George Wolfe, on the other hand, plans to continue working in the Los Angeles River in the future. He began as an unwitting activist pushed into action by the call from Heather Wylie, but he is now working for a policy which allows for safe and credible access to the river for recreation. When that

is established, he plans to start a business doing expeditions down the river with which he can educate participants on the river, its needs, and how they can get involved in its restoration.^{ciii}

5. The Government Agencies

The Los Angeles River is particularly unusual because no one seems to have a clear idea of who is in charge of it. There are a variety of government bodies which have jurisdiction over various parts of the river, but there are other parts (both physical and managerial) over which apparently nobody has jurisdiction. This has made it very difficult for the organizations and individuals of the Los Angeles River Movement to figure out who they should pressure to successfully influence the revitalization of the river. In this section, I will cover the major government offices and committees which have some decision making power. When it comes to the Los Angeles River most of these agencies have the primary goal of implementing the Los Angeles River Master Plan, a document developed by a variety of government departments and outside organizations to facilitate its revitalization, and so I will also review the major points of the plan.

The Los Angeles River Master Plan

The Los Angeles River Master Plan is a 10 chapter-long document which outlines a general plan for the city to create park space, revitalize the river, spark economic development along the river, and organize a management framework. It begins by discussing the overarching vision for the river, including sketches of possible improvements, and a list of extremely broad goals and values of the plan.

It then discusses some issues which could affect the plan, including physical characteristics of the channel and an ecological and political context for revitalization. Next it lists some goals for restoration such as safe public access, flood control, water quality, and riparian habitat reconstruction. The plan also includes a few chapters specifically related to connecting the river to the communities which line it by creating park space and using art along the river. The neighboring communities are then discussed in an economic development context, with costs and benefits, opportunities, and consequences of projects.^{civ}

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The next chapter of the plan proposes the creation of a number of management entities. The first, the Los Angeles River Authority (or sometimes called the Joint Powers Authority), would have control over “river reconstruction, water quality, right-of-way, maintenance and enhancement, public liability, [and] permitting.”^{cv} It would be run by officials from the city and county with input from the Army Corps (because the Corps is technically not allowed to officially enter this kind of agreement).^{cvi} Funding would come from participating agencies with some assistance from the Army Corps. The second body, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation, would be a private body geared towards accruing land and developing it along a Los Angeles River corridor.^{cvi} Although its initial funding would come from the city and state, its initial Board of Directors would be appointed by city officials, and it would be created by city ordinance, ideally over time it would become autonomous and self-sufficient.^{cvi} The last entity, the Los Angeles River Foundation, would have a more “philanthropic” mission.^{cix} This non-profit agency would have no formal connection to the city, Revitalization Corporation, nor the River Authority and would seek private funding sources through grants and donations to implement projects which its Board of Directors selects.^{cx} Larry Hsu of the Department of Public Works River Office compared its goals to those of FoLAR, a non-governmental organization with a goal of public benefit and with the ability to raise money and purchase property.^{cx} In fact, councilmember Ed Reyes asked Lewis MacAdams if he would modify Friends of the LA River to be connected to the city and fulfill the position suggested by the Master Plan, however Lewis refused because he believes FoLAR is more effective on the outside rather than as a part of the city.^{cxii} Since the creation of the River Master Plan the River Authority (now known as the River Cooperation Committee) and the Revitalization Corporation have been created, but the River Foundation has yet to be established [at this time](#) (see “The Cooperation Committee” section).^{cxiii}

The final chapter of the River Master Plan discusses implementation of all these projects and ideas including information on how to create the three entities which would form the management structure for the river. It also gives a basic plan for a few other projects, some of which would be implemented in

partnership with the Army Corps. Lastly, it describes possible funding sources for projects, organized by type of project.^{cxiv}

Despite the variety of individuals, organizations, and agencies involved in the creation of the Master Plan, it still appears to have some major setbacks. When I asked him, Ed Reyes (chair of the city's Ad-Hoc River Committee and a leader in the plan's creation) sidestepped the question of the shortcomings of the plan or the Ad-Hoc River Committee structure.^{cxv} But upon reading the plan, I found some issues with this celebrated document. First, the plan had little detail regarding enforcement of its ideas. Its final section on implementation suggests funding sources and ideas for the three entities but gives no true power or responsibility to any currently existing authority to implement any project. In fact, the projects in the Master Plan are recommendations or suggestions rather than requirements.

Additionally, the plan's section on mitigating gentrification effects of redevelopment along the river corridor is a paragraph long and basically says that gentrification happens and that when implementing projects, the leading authority should be aware that it happens. It gives no recommendations or sources of information on how to prevent gentrification and gives no requirements to prevent it. Finally, the largest drawback to the plan probably is its lack of a timeline. It gives no advice on how long any given project should take, and when I asked Ed Reyes for a timeline he was unable or unwilling to respond with expected or target dates of completion for committee goals.^{cxvi} It appears that should riverside communities or organizations outside the government want the River Master Plan enforced more quickly they would have to be the driving force to see it through rather than relying on the plan itself, even though the plan is supported at the City and County level.

The City Ad-Hoc River Committee

The city's Ad-Hoc River Committee primarily consists of city council members supported by representatives from city departments like transportation, water and power, and the Bureau of Engineering. Its primary goal is the implementation of the Los Angeles River Master Plan.^{cxvii}

Although the Los Angeles River Master Plan outlines a plan for the entire length of the river, the Ad-Hoc River Committee only has direct power over the 30-mile section of the river within the city limits. Councilmember Ed Reyes, the chair of the committee, says that this has not inhibited the implementation of the river plan. “The Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River works with various City departments including Public Works, as well as the County, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Each entity--the city, county, and federal agencies--have jurisdiction over different parts of the LA River. We continue to collaborate with them to accomplish the goals laid out in the Master Plan”, he says. He considers these six to have been the most important concrete results of the Master Plan:

“1. Establishment of a River Office and liaisons in various City Departments to continue, monitor and implement the work of LARRMP as it progresses over the years.

2. Establishment of the RiverKeepers (RiverCorps), a job training program for young adults that provides river maintenance, security, and life skills using the river as the classroom

3. Completion of the 7.5 mile Bicycle Path along the Glendale Narrows segment of the LA River, connecting over 15 river adjacent parks and forming a linear park from Griffith Park to the River Center in Cypress Park.

4. Formation of the River Revitalization Corporation, a non-profit organization that will act as the real estate arm of the City, helping negotiate, acquire, and develop properties along the river.

5. Formation of the River Cooperation Committee, an official group composed of City and County with counsel from the US Corps of Engineers, created to advise on the public works, infrastructure, and flood management improvements in the river channel.

6. Establishment of two state parks, three ongoing park construction projects, one

bridge completion, one property acquisition, 7.5 mile bike path, three sister river agreements, and nomination to EPA's Urban Waters Program.”

During the creation of the River Master Plan, the Ad-Hoc River Committee held several public workshops to hear residents along the river share their visions for its future.^{cxviii} They also depended on input from various non-profits and community groups listed on the River Committee’s website, though neither the website nor Ed Reyes offer specifics on how they were included in the formative process of the Master Plan.

Beyond the implementation of the Master Plan, “the Ad Hoc committee on the L.A. River is involved in creating public policy for all matters related to the L.A. River including water and air quality, tributaries, watershed management and green space”. The success of the committee, according to Ed Reyes, is only hindered by the lack of funding available for river projects. “Still”, he says “we have made significant headway in the Master Plan.”^{cxix}

The City Department of Public Works

The City of Los Angeles Department of Public Works has no direct jurisdiction over the Los Angeles River channel itself; that is shared by the County Flood Control District and the Army Corps. However, it does have a River Office in the Bureau of Engineering responsible for implementing the Los Angeles River Master Plan. The Bureau of Engineering is considered a supportive department rather than an operational one, and generally works on projects when another bureau asks for support on a construction plan or engineering project. The [City](#) Public Works Department was integral to the creation of the River Cooperation Committee and the River Revitalization Corporation outlined in the River Master Plan, though they have no official position on the committee. They are now working to create the last entity, the River Foundation, and have done all the background work for it; but now it is up to the mayor and city council to approve and implement it.^{cxx}

Their work with the river mostly involves other agencies, such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the County Public Works, and they have found that working interdepartmentally is easier said than done. The County, says River Office leader Larry Hsu, does not want to give up its authority over the river, and the River Cooperation Committee forces the County Public Works Department to share its power with other governmental groups. On the other hand, they have found the Army Corps has gotten better at sharing in recent times. Community groups and individuals unfortunately have no official power in the actions of Public Works, though. The Ad Hoc River Committee and River Cooperation Committee meetings are the only forum for them to speak on any actions by the Department of Public Works.^{cxxi}

The Army Corps of Engineers

The Army Corps of Engineers' mission is to "[p]rovide vital public engineering services in peace and war to strengthen our Nation's security, energize the economy, and reduce risks from disasters."^{cxxii} They are the agency responsible for the original construction of the river channel in the 1930s, but they don't have absolute control over it. They share at least some responsibility for maintenance with the County Flood Control District, as shown by the Flood Control District jurisdictional map (figure 1). Also, they have responsibility for conducting feasibility studies on river projects to assure that the channel can still control large floods after completion. To do these studies, they first are tasked by another government agency (like the city of LA or Compton) and will sometimes work with (but not for) non-profit organizations at the request of that agency.^{cxxiii} Before the EPA stepped in with a special case determination, the Army Corps also appeared to have the power to determine the navigability of the river under section 404 of the Clean Water Act, but now the EPA's determination has superseded the Corps' authority.^{cxxiv}

Unfortunately, the public has little knowledge as to what power the Army Corps of Engineers has when it comes to the river. For the river advocates, the Army Corps has been shrouded in

confusion, and they have been tossed back and forth between departments in an attempt to get answers about such basic things as permits. I have attempted to discover the complete jurisdictional power of the Army Corps of Engineers over the Los Angeles River, but have experienced the same issues. Every department and individual has referred me to at least two others. I was told by one official that even the Army Corps is not sure of its range of duties, and that there is currently a “big effort” between the County, City, and Army Corps to figure out who has power over what in the river.^{cxxv} After a month and a half of phone calls I still have yet to uncover many answers. In the future, I hope to continue calling and meeting with Army Corps officials in an attempt to understand their roles in river revitalization.

The River Cooperation Committee

The River Cooperation Committee consists of representatives from the City (Bureau of Sanitation, Chief City Engineer, Recreation and Parks, Water and Power), the County Flood Control District (Watershed Management, Water Resources, Flood Maintenance, Engineering), and an advisor from the Army Corps of Engineers. According to a fact sheet generated by the committee, “The LARCC was formalized in the Los Angeles River Memorandum of Understanding of 2009[, approved by the Ad-Hoc River Committee,] and meets at least twice per year to share information, evaluate, and make recommendations about public, private, and non-profit sector projects along the upper reach of the Los Angeles River”. The “upper reach” includes the first 32 miles of the river in the San Fernando Valley, Glendale Narrows, and through downtown Los Angeles. The committee hears proposals for river projects in the early stages of their development to assure that projects are proceeding in compliance with the region’s goals (which in general are those of the LA River Master Plan) and provide feedback. Additionally, they vote to either recommend that projects proceed, proceed with changes, or not recommend a project while considering the ecological, engineering, and community impacts of each project.^{cxxvi} If they establish a system for public access in the future, this committee would probably be

in charge of managing the permitting because of their current work with river right-of-way.^{cxxvii} Their bi-annual meetings are public, and occasionally they invite community leaders and organizations to present at their meetings (Lewis MacAdams was scheduled to speak on the issue of access at the April 2011 meeting.^{cxxviii}

The County Flood Control District

The Los Angeles County Flood Control District has jurisdiction over the river channel in the areas not controlled by the Army Corps of engineers. This entity was created with the implementation of the Los Angeles County Flood Control Act of 1915 after one of the many major flood disasters caused severe damage to infrastructure and property in Los Angeles. It is monitored by the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors. The Act originally gave the Flood Control District power over not only flood protection, but also water conservation, recreational usage, and beautification within its jurisdictional area. However, in the mid-80s they transferred the power of planning and “operational activities” to the County Department of Public Works.^{cxxix}

The County Department of Public Works

The County Department of Public Works’ mission is “[t]o create a balance between urban and natural resources within the Los Angeles River Watershed”. Their main goals are to improve water quality, enhance flood control, create park space, implement water capture and groundwater recharge projects, as well as increase recreational use and habitat revitalization in the river. “The Los Angeles River Watershed Section [of the County Public Works] is tasked with finding ways to restore or revitalize the channels within the watershed and thereby provide significant opportunities for recreation and aesthetic improvement for the Los Angeles metropolitan area while protecting the Los Angeles Basin from major flooding”.^{cxxx} They have helped to direct funding towards river projects, led eight Earth Day events to increase public awareness of the river, and have implemented a landscaping and signage project to “facilitate development”.^{cxxxi}

6. Reflections on a Movement

At this point, I believe it is important to reflect on the work done by both government agencies and the ~~non~~-governmental organizations and individuals which have contributed to the revitalization efforts in the Los Angeles River. Also important is looking to the future to discover what could be done to steer the movement towards even more success. In my discussions with the river movement leaders working outside the government, I asked each their opinions on what strategies they believed need to be employed to push the movement forward, what they believed has led to the movement's current success, and what they believe sets the Los Angeles River Movement apart from other urban river movements in the United States. As so often happens when people are asked their opinion, each had different ideas. In this section I will outline the responses of the activists and the leaders working from outside of the government.

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Strategies

Question: What do you think the organizations and individuals working to restore or provide access to the river should be focusing on at this point? What strategies should they be employing?

Lewis MacAdams:

- ❖ They should be focusing on things which will build constituencies such as long term educational programs.
- ❖ Strategies such as civil disobedience, direct action, and lawsuits can sometimes help, but the climate, timing, and approach must be right.^{cxxxii}

Jenny Price

- ❖ It's hard to decide one strategy over the other, but right now we should be focusing on the issue of public access. The government doesn't know how to allow people to the river safely, but people are still clamoring for it, and this has created an unsettled period. The current approach is to work with government agencies cooperatively through public meetings. However if the river advocates exhaust legitimate channels, other tactics could be appropriate and they could begin to work more "above the radar."^{cxxxiii}

Joe Linton

- ❖ Everything depends on what the people doing the projects would want to achieve as an end result. He personally focuses on public education in hopes that it will generate more interest around the work towards healthier rivers and watersheds.^{cxxxiv}

George Wolfe

- ❖ More groups should initialize projects at the same time, thereby making it "more difficult for the powers that be to disregard revitalization efforts or drag their feet. We should leverage our collective power to put pressure on local municipalities to provide a comprehensive river access policy."
- ❖ The movement should also focus on educating the public to change their minds about the river.
- ❖ Lastly, activists and leaders in the river movement should begin working with business to build a powerful constituency instead of viewing them as always opposed in environmental issues.^{cxxxv}

Heather Wylie

- ❖ Public involvement with holding agencies accountable to follow through with restoration will be vital to keeping things moving in the movement. "People get exactly the kind of government they deserve--if we want good government we need to be involved."^{cxxxvi}

Success and effectiveness

Question: What has made the Los Angeles River Movement effective? How could it be made more effective?

Lewis MacAdams

- ❖ The large and diverse coalition of organizations working to revitalize the river has certainly contributed to its success. The coalition is flexible and provisional, making the movement flexible
- ❖ Whether the river movement is very effective or not, it wouldn't be as much fun if the whole thing was united under one group. No one specific is in charge, and that is the reason some people love it.^{cxxxvii}

Jenny Price

- ❖ The movement has been successful to date largely because for the city, the river is now an asset rather than a burden. This gives legitimacy to any river projects and facilitates access to federal funds. However, there has been no immediate input of funding coming out of the city's

support. They have been looking into public access, boat access, etc after the creation of the Master Plan, but it's not an instant process.^{xxxviii}

Joe Linton

- ❖ A major setback for the movement has been a lack of funding from the government. A lot of river revitalization projects have occurred in more favorable economic times, and right now the city, state, and federal budgets are really tight so there are fewer resources to put towards “non-essential” projects.
- ❖ Sometimes local leadership is not all that effective. “[M]ore inspired, more strategic folks who would make it a priority might accomplish more.”^{xxxix}

George Wolfe

- ❖ If the environmental groups formed a tighter unit and fought issues collectively rather than separately, the movement could be made more effective.
- ❖ Work needs to be done to get the city, county, and army corps to work together for the sake of the river rather than letting them delay because of historical differences.
- ❖ The general public needs to feel more connection to their local river, hopefully then they may voice their support to local politicians.^{cxl}

Heather Wylie

- ❖ “What is needed to keep things moving with restoring the LA River is constant public involvement with the process to hold the agencies accountable to following through with restoration.”
- ❖ “The big white elephant in the room is the fact that we must un-pave LA before we can restore the river. What [that means] is that we must retro fit the watershed's urban environment to

restore the way water flows through the watershed... Thus we need to solve this problem with a different kind of thinking than what created it-- we need to think outside the concrete box and fix the damage done to the watershed before we can restore the river."^{cxli}

Lessons from the Los Angeles River Movement

Question: What do you think sets the "LA River Movement" apart from other river movements? What do you think the LA River movement could teach other urban river movements?

Lewis MacAdams

- ❖ The magnitude of concrete in this river sets it apart from other rivers. A river degraded to this degree will attract a particular kind of audience, and the organizations involved in its restoration must be sensitive to that. (But people have started to embrace it because, though it is degraded, it is ours).
- ❖ The peculiarity of the river itself strikes people as very "Los Angeles". It has become a symbol of post-industrialism and a way of life that is no longer possible.
- ❖ This river movement is new and weird because of the weirdness of the river, and the tone has remained "jolly". At least Friends of the Los Angeles River tries to keep the movement fun, it's less about "us vs. them" than "let's work together".^{cxlii}

Jenny Price

- ❖ This river movement is connected to other river movements. Cities have historically destroyed rivers, and now they are collectively trying to revive them.
- ❖ This river is peculiar in that it has strong power as a symbol of what is wrong with Los Angeles.

- ❖ The biggest thing which sets it apart, though, is that the Los Angeles River is an extreme case. It's a concrete box. Not only that, but whereas most river projects are one or two miles the Los Angeles River is over 50. It's a long river, and Los Angeles is very spread out. This huge scale can be a sign to other urban river movements that if the Los Angeles River Movement can succeed, theirs can as well.
- ❖ The Los Angeles River Movement is also on the cutting edge in storm-water management, cutting runoff, and dumping.^{cxliii}

Joe Linton

- ❖ The one thing different would be that the river itself is very degraded and largely forgotten compared to other rivers. Many river movements form around rivers that look more natural than the Los Angeles River. The Los Angeles Basin was extremely flood-prone, resulting in extreme measures to contain its water.
- ❖ But generally, this movement is not very different from other urban river movements.^{cxliiv}

George Wolfe

- ❖ Other river movements tend to center around non-urban rivers. The issues are often dams or pollution affecting otherwise pristine stretches of waterway. The Los Angeles River Movement was centered around the issue of building over parts of a watershed.
- ❖ The variety of agencies working on the Los Angeles River is unusual because you have the intersection of the city, county, and Army Corps (and occasionally the EPA). They have already penned down plans for revitalization, and yet often they are the ones standing in the way of restoration- "a strange set of circumstances that seems unique to [Los Angeles and] its complex politics."

- ❖ The Los Angeles River also has a particular attraction because of its iconic stature in Hollywood films, as well as its notoriety as a symbol of Los Angeles' issues. "[T]he power of the movement comes from the shock at how badly mankind can abuse nature, and when people confront that they really want to see this river recover."^{cxlv}

Heather Wylie

- ❖ The Los Angeles River Movement is not unusual. "This [is] what must be done in every watershed if we are to have any hope of recovering our waters from impairment, having a sustainable amount of ground water, restoring our streams and reducing flooding."^{cxlvi}

Clearly, even those people working together to revitalize the river have differing conclusions about its success, setbacks, and what we can glean from it as lessons in river restoration. This is because, as George Wolfe mentioned, the intersection of the organizations, individuals, agencies, and politics of the Los Angeles River has created a complex web of power and connections around it. The important thing to take away from these voices is that there are many ways to be part of a single movement, and the combination of these methods is what leads to that movement's success.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

From the discussion of the history of the river, through a look at the current work of organizations and individuals working to revitalize it, and into a speculation about the future of the movement, certain patterns and ideas stick out in my mind as key to the success of the movement so far. The first asset, a large number of organizations working on different parts of the river movement, allows coalitions to rally around single issues while still maintaining a diverse range of individual goals. This gives the river movement flexibility to work on many different issues at once and speed up the revitalization process by acting on multiple fronts.

Next, the “apple pie-ing” of the river movement and transition of the public’s perception of the river (from a menace, to a forgotten control channel, to a river and asset), or what Lewis would consider the “natural movement of ideas” from the fringes to the mainstream, have launched the revitalization movement from being virtually just Lewis himself to gaining support for the city, county, communities, and even the Army Corps of Engineers. Where in 1985 I imagine Lewis would never have expected to get much coverage in local newspapers, just over 20 years later the Los Angeles River Movement gained national attention with the widely-supported EPA navigability decision. However, the mainstreaming of the Los Angeles River Movement also has potential to restrain the organizations and individuals working towards revitalization.

The “jolly” attitude prescribed by Lewis in combination with the seemingly supportive political climate (which sees the river as an asset) described by Jenny Price can lead to complacency, where extra-governmental organizations stop demanding change from the various agencies working on the river because they are reassured that the officials support their work. Despite the difficult funding-climate in the city, county, and federal governments, if the activists of the Los Angeles River stop demanding large changes (like the removal of concrete from the channel bottom) progress will slow dramatically. A combination of recommendations by current activists could increase the organizations’

power to push projects. To make large demands and be taken seriously, the movement must cultivate its constituency. Additionally, a few could follow George Wolfe’s advice and connect to business sector interests to get more financial and political support (as long as they maintain the goal of revitalization).

The largest failure I see in this movement, however, is the hole left by the mainstreaming of FoLAR. In order to generate new and innovative ways of thinking, we need a group pushing the envelope. As FoLAR was virtually the first organization of the Los Angeles River movement, its development

established a role as a middle-of-the-road organization which never existed before. Now, though, I think

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the river advocacy climate is starving for a new and cutting edge activism to carry it to the next level. If we can successfully push the movement forward, the supportive atmosphere surrounding the Los Angeles River will launch another wave of innovation like those seen over the past 25 years.

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8. Figures

Figure 1. Jurisdictional Map of the Los Angeles River channel. Portions in red are maintained and controlled by the Los Angeles County Flood Control District. Portions in blue are controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers. Unfortunately, the River Cooperation Committee website (the source of this map) does not detail what it means for these two agencies to have jurisdiction over these sections of the river. (website)



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