

The CSERC Newsletter

Like a stone tossed into still water, knowledge about environmental issues can ripple outward far beyond its beginning point, and perhaps return in a wave of concern, active involvement, and greater awareness of nature in the mountains and foothills around us.



Changes are happening. What used to be expected as “normal” is now often far different. How is the region’s environment being affected?

In the past 7 years, the Rim Fire and Donnell Fire roasted tens of thousands of acres of local forests at high severity, in places killing precious, old growth trees and converting broad areas of forest into resprouting brush fields. An exceptional three-year drought sparked an outbreak of bark beetles that killed more than 150 million conifers in the Sierra Nevada – due in part to unnaturally dense forest stands. Oak woodlands also face many threats, and water in the region’s rivers is being aggressively diverted for agriculture and other uses.

Amid the chaos and uncertainty from COVID-19, environmental changes are happening so fast it is hard to even keep track. Scientists warn that greenhouse gas emissions are a major contributor to the changing climate, yet the current Administration unravels climate change agreements and undermines plans to reduce emissions. The Administration has also acted to weaken the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Environmental policies are under attack.

All of this results in policy changes and land management mandates that often directly affect this iconic region of the Sierra Nevada. In this newsletter, we highlight some plans or project proposals that have potential to affect key areas or broad portions of the region. CSERC continues to work on a wide range of conservation issues - prioritizing protection for water, wildlife, and wild places. What will each new day bring?

Sara Husby takes on the role as CSERC's Program Director



At the start of this summer, Sara Husby joined CSERC as our new Program Director. Sara brings a background of over 10 years of non-profit environmental management and conservation experience. She was the Executive Director and Campaign Director for Tuleyome, a conservation nonprofit that works to protect the Inner Coast Range of California. And, as Executive Director, she led the Anza Borrego Foundation, which partners with the State of California to protect the Anza Borrego Desert State Park.

There were many challenges getting Sara here to start work. COVID-19 travel restrictions delayed her ability to initially visit the area and to search for a place to stay. But Sara is now busy participating on behalf of CSERC in the region's three main collaborative stakeholder group processes. She's also been working on the State Water Board's plan for suction dredging, participating in lots of video conference calls that are important for the Phoenix hydroelectric planning process, and also engaging in numerous forest and conservation coalition calls.

CSERC adjusts to work amidst the pandemic

The CSERC staff has worked hard to stay effective amidst the new conditions caused by the pandemic. There has obviously been a major shift away from in-person meetings, field sessions, and workday projects where CSERC staff and volunteers joined in the past to do restoration work. Social distancing restrictions have clearly had a ripple effect for environmental advocacy and for how CSERC pursues our mission.

Digital communications have never been more important. CSERC actively networks with fellow conservation organizations, research scientists, agency decisionmakers, the media, and agency staffs as we press for actions to best protect the local region.

Sara will be heading up many of CSERC's outreach and stakeholder engagement efforts over coming months. She'll also be inviting feedback from members as to how we can be most effective at this time in raising awareness about the issues of highest importance for our region.

***This End-of-Summer 2020 newsletter is
a quarterly publication of the***

***Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center
P.O. Box 396, Twain Harte, CA 95383***

Phone: (209) 586-7440
E-mail: johnb@cserc.org
Website: www.cserc.org

***CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization working to
protect the water, wildlife, and wild places of the Northern
Yosemite region. CSERC relies entirely on grants and
donations from people like you to do that critical mission.***

Board of Directors

Jamie Lee Akins
Jason Reed
Robert Rajewski
Tom Parrington
Steve Hannon

Staff

John Buckley, executive director
Julia Stephens, special projects
Heather Campbell, website translator
Sara Husby, program director



Agencies consider options for restoring Ackerson Meadow

In July, Yosemite Park planners and Forest Service staff unveiled a major new restoration project that is intended to repair and enhance Ackerson Meadow. The public was invited to share input on the plan.

Located roughly two miles north of the Big Oak Flat entrance to Yosemite Park, Ackerson Meadow was previously private land before being transferred to Yosemite. It is one of the largest and most iconic meadows in the region, due in part to its rich diversity of habitat that results in abundant wildlife. The photo above shows only one relatively small portion of the overall meadow complex.

Past studies found an amazing number of bird species make use of the meadow and surrounding forest areas. Bears, deer, coyotes, bobcats, and sometimes even a rare great gray owl (below) can be observed. But a century of livestock effects caused the main stream that winds through the meadow complex to down-cut so deeply that in many places it is now a steep, eroded gully. As a result, significant portions of the once-wet meadow habitat have dried out. Invasive weeds are a threat. Cattle are now excluded on the Park portion of the meadow, but cattle still graze on the USFS portion - continuing to introduce non-native weeds and continuing to trample, compact, and degrade the meadow.

Federal agency planners are considering three different restoration strategies. The most expensive would use heavy equipment to fill the gully system with soil collected from forest areas outside of the meadow. A second option would be to create “plug and pond” stepping stones of 80+ individual ponds separated by fill soil to create a string of ponds across the meadow. The third option would create 3-ft-high imitation beaver dams along the stream corridor to capture sediment and slowly raise the level of the gully.

CSERC recommends the strategic mix of all three restoration methods. We support using heavy equipment to fill most of the gouged-out gully areas and then to create a few plug-and-pond sites along the stream. In shallow gully places where imitation beaver dams are expected to be effective, those treatments could be applied. This huge project is now in the early stages of restoration planning, but CSERC strongly endorses getting treatments approved as soon as possible in order to bring back the health of this important meadow that is valuable for so many wildlife species.



PG&E files formal Phoenix hydroelectric plan – the outcome will determine how the South Fork Stanislaus River is managed for decades



Showing up at meeting after meeting for years on end is key for any conservation group that participates in the “relicensing” of hydroelectric facilities. It’s also important to carefully review highly technical documents in order to actually understand how the paperwork translates into potential impacts for the affected environment.

Under requirements set by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), hydroelectric facility licensees (such as PG&E) go through years of planning discussions with federal and state agencies - and sometimes with groups such as CSERC. **Over two decades, CSERC staff has participated in 250+ FERC relicensing meetings** – with more than 30 sessions just for the current Phoenix FERC relicensing project.

[At meetings for the Phoenix project, PG&E staff and consultants presented their proposals for how PG&E aims to manage river flows, wildlife measures, recreational facilities, and overall operations of the South Fork Stanislaus River, Lyons Reservoir, the Main Tuolumne Canal, and the Phoenix Powerhouse for years into the future.](#)

Federal and state agencies, along with CSERC, have responded back to PG&E’s plans with proposals that could potentially better meet recreation needs or better ensure that enough water is actually left in the river to benefit aquatic species over the long term. The potential effects of the Phoenix project on foothill yellow-legged frogs in the South Fork Stanislaus River has been one key focus of concern during the FERC process.

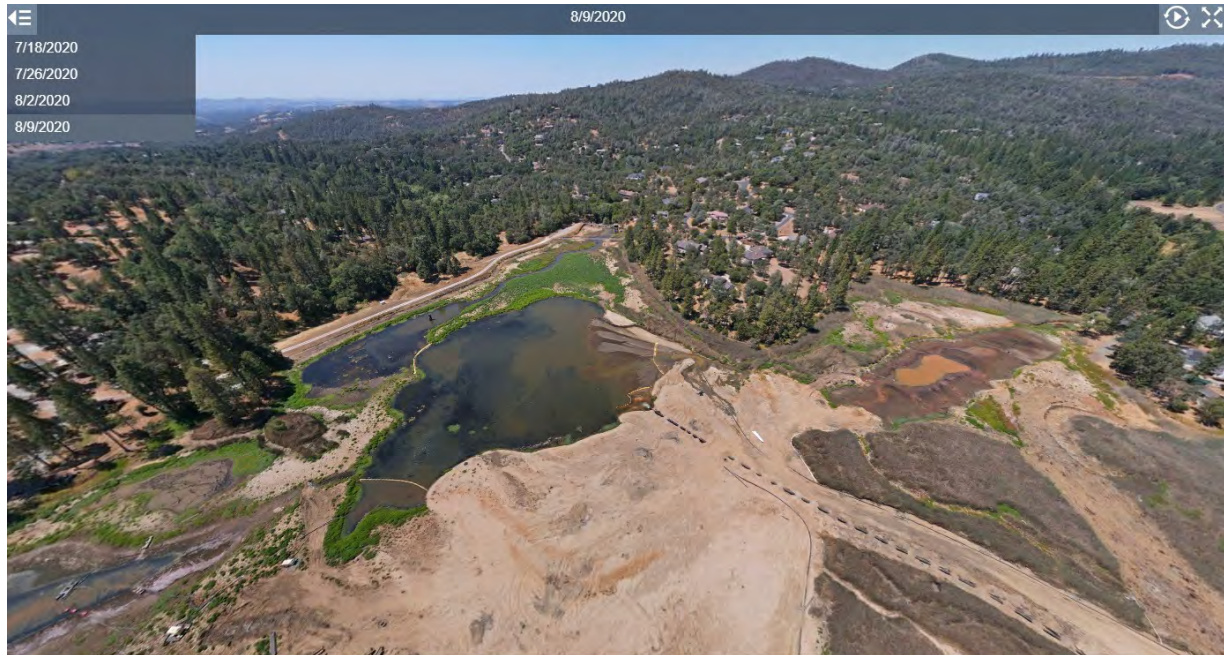
Dams can cause many negative impacts for amphibians. Reduction of the natural, unimpaired river flows may result in the stranding of frog egg masses – wiping out the eggs or embryos. How fast PG&E raises or lowers river flow releases (called the ramping rate) can also markedly affect frogs.

Over months of often-intense discussions, PG&E, CSERC, and all the other relicensing participants have attempted to find agreement on key issues. One pivotal debate has been over the question of how much minimum river flow should be left in the South Fork Stanislaus River in varying water year types (from wet to critically dry). Thanks to concessions by all sides, the FERC process has potential to result in negotiated agreements that – if finalized by the FERC - could provide adequate protection for vulnerable species and the river system for decades. The final outcome will affect hydroelectricity, water supplies, and all the aquatic species of the South Fork Stanislaus River system.



Foothill yellow-legged frog - photo courtesy Amy Lind, USFS

At last, work actually begins on the Phoenix Lake Restoration Project



More than 15 years ago, CSERC began partnering with concerned Phoenix Lake property owners and other area interests to form the Phoenix Lake Task Force. That volunteer group spent years planning the basics of a restoration project that would restore water quality and improve water storage at Phoenix Lake. With the Tuolumne Utilities District (TUD) taking the lead for the project, the successful acquisition of state grant funds allowed TUD to complete years of studies and to then plan the actual treatments. Now, this summer, the long-awaited Phoenix Lake Preservation and Restoration Project has finally launched.

The aerial drone photo above was taken by Jody Dugan. It shows that some portions of the lake are being strategically kept in pools to protect fish and other aquatic species, while much of the reservoir is drained in order to enable heavy equipment to access the main lake area to dig out the accumulated sediment. **At least \$4.1 million in work is expected to be done this year (and possibly into next year) by Steve Manning Construction, Inc (SMCI).** Initial work includes the construction of more than 70 dewatering wells with pumps that are used to dry out sections of the reservoir in order to allow the excavation of the sediment.



The project will eventually transport a huge amount of excavated sediment onto a neighboring apple orchard property. It will also create a deep new channel to redirect flow through the Lake to increase the oxygen level, minimize areas with stagnant water, minimize invasive aquatic weeds, and eliminate odors.

At 88 acres, Phoenix Lake provides more than 650 acre-feet of water storage that serves Sonora, Jamestown, Scenic View, and Mono Village communities. If the project is as successful as planned, excavation could restore an extra 200 acre-feet of water storage. Most important to CSERC however, is the project's goal of improving water quality and enhancing the overall ecological value of the lake and its surrounding habitat.

CSERC and citizen activists continue to oppose proposed leap-frog development projects along the highway to Yosemite



It can be a daunting task to carefully review lengthy, dry, technical documents in order to respond to development projects. **It is even more challenging to review two adjacent development proposals with environmental impact reports that total over 3,000 pages of assessment and appendices. It took weeks for CSERC staff to wade through the EIRs for the “Yosemite Under Canvas” and “Terra Vi Lodge” projects.**

An EIR is supposed to identify significant impacts and to consider alternatives to reduce those impacts. Instead, both of the two EIRs were clearly biased, inaccurate, and incomplete.

For the past two years CSERC has worked closely with a wide range of concerned citizens, local conservation activists, and others who have raised objections to two high-profile leap-frog development projects proposed at the site shown in the photo above -- along the Highway 120 route leading to Yosemite National Park.

The first project (**Yosemite Under Canvas**) would feature 99 “glamour camping” tent cabins with individual wood-burning stoves, dining facilities, an administrative facility, laundry, etc. Across the street, an even larger project (**the Terra Vi Lodge**) would construct a 100-room main lodge, guest cabins, a bar, a restaurant, a market, and even a helicopter landing pad. (See the project layout design below.) Both projects are classic examples of “leapfrog development” – projects located far from existing public services. **CSERC’s key objection is that the two project sites have no public water, no public sewer, and no close-by fire protection, ambulance, or law enforcement services.**

In the right location, both projects could likely fit within a core community area. But at the current site, each would not only cause scenic impacts, both projects would place large numbers of customers at risk from another major wildfire like the Rim Fire that burned across the site just 7 years ago. Yet the DEIRs for each project misleadingly dismiss any significant wildfire risk.

Worst of all, both projects would rely on unproven well water and fancy septic systems to process millions of gallons of wastewater that would be generated each year. The septic effluent would be pumped to soak down into the soil toward the underlying wells. The risk for contaminated water would be high, and the potential for wells to fail in a drought would also be high. CSERC has repeatedly pointed out many significant risks of the two projects. Yet the DEIRs are written by consultants who shrug off almost all impacts as insignificant. The next step for each project will be a final EIR and then potential hearings for each project by Tuolumne County decisionmakers.



In contrast, a new lodging proposal for the Highway 120 “Scar” site might be appropriate for that location



Four decades ago, a development plan led to the near-total bulldozing of property on the south side of Highway 120 between Big Oak Flat and Groveland. Construction began on a gas station and an initial road layout. Then the project abruptly failed, and for years the site was left denuded. Over time bushes and trees resprouted across some areas, but eroding drainage gullies widened and deepened. Many familiar with the property called it “the Scar” site.

In the years since, when new developments have been proposed elsewhere along the Highway 120 corridor, CSERC has suggested that project proponents should take advantage of the generally flat, easily accessed, and fully serviced “Scar” site. Now, after decades of sitting vacant, a new project may be brought forward for this large property.



Investors and their design team are envisioning a low-density lodging project with accommodations for roughly 150 guests in free-standing cabins that are planned to provide a forest and meadow-type experience. An additional area of “tiny homes-type” cabins could appeal to other guests. There would be a main lodge and restaurant along with a check-in reception center. Parking areas would be laid out close to the highway, and paths would provide access for guests to reach their cabin units scattered across the bulk of the property.

CSERC staff was provided with an initial concept presentation for the project when the development team reached out to learn of any obvious environmental issues or other major social or resource concerns. **The fact that this site can be served by public water and sewer is a one positive factor.** Also, knowing that the new development would help correct the site’s erosion problems and would revegetate existing bare areas are other factors CSERC will consider in eventually taking a position after the project is fully designed and submitted to the County.

CSERC and YSS aim for middle-ground solutions to make local forests less vulnerable to damaging wildfires and drought

Sometimes environmental issues are mostly black or white. Should a free-flowing river be dammed? Should a wild place be defiled by new roads or by mining or by development? Those who care for nature will hopefully oppose those actions. But at other times, identifying environmental solutions can be more complex.

In the past, when conservation publications featured articles about threatened forests, the villains were usually logging companies; and the forest threats were often clearcuts, or the cutting of old growth trees, or bulldozers clearing hillsides to convert diverse, natural forest habitat into sterile tree farms.

There is no question that ecologically-harmful logging is still rampant in many places on our planet. **But cutting trees can be done in many different ways. In the Sierra Nevada, the strategic use of forest thinning treatments can be a beneficial way to open up overgrown forests** -- to reduce fuel connectivity and to enable remaining trees to be more resilient when stressed by the next inevitable drought or bark beetle infestation. *(A few years after logging, thinned sites can look like the area at right.)*

Renowned forest research scientists have repeatedly called for more use of prescribed burns and for carefully managed wildfires in some situations. They've also called for a greater use of forest thinning.



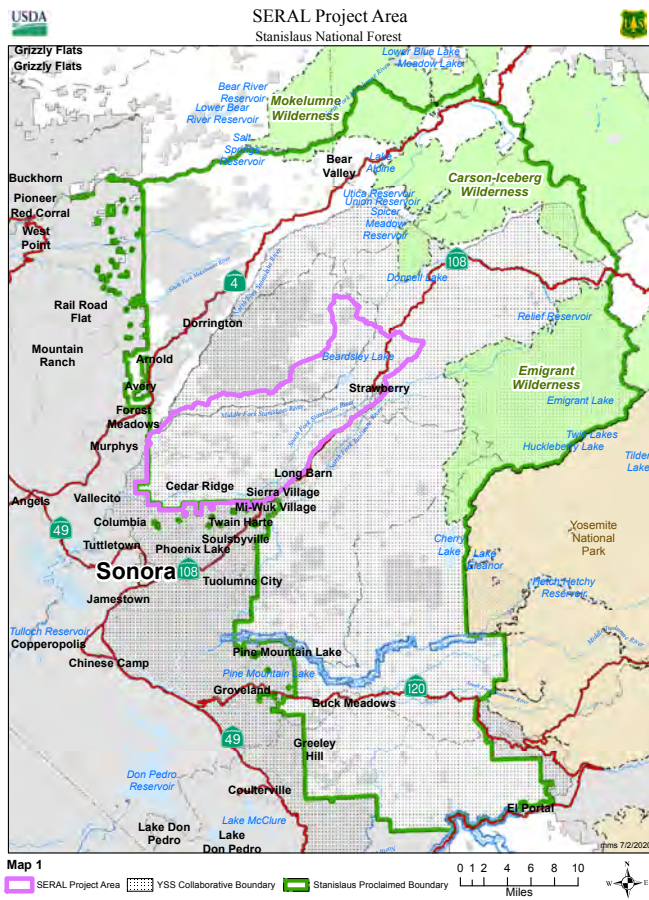
That key objective – to ramp up the pace and scale of all the forest treatments in the forest management tool bag – is the motivation behind the giant SERAL project that's described on the opposite page.

As wildfires continue to burn intensely across California and the West, CSERC is motivated more than ever to speak out with support for actions that may reduce devastating forest fires -- biomass removal, forest thinning, mastication of brush, and the timely use of prescribed fire to treat surface and ladder fuels *(the photo at left shows a forest area immediately after prescribed burning)).*



This past winter, CSERC and others in the YSS forest stakeholder group proposed a huge project that would greatly ramp up forest treatments. Now a key question is whether the Forest Service can move that YSS concept through the planning process without creating needless controversy or sparking widespread opposition that could delay those treatments.

The SERAL Project – Why does CSERC support the giant project plan?



As CSERC worked with other interests in YSS to help draft a large landscape project proposal, two themes were emphasized. **(1) Forest stakeholders don't want any more wildfires wiping out vast areas of precious forest habitat. "NO MORE RIM FIRES!"** **2) And In order to lower wildfire risk, YSS strongly advocates for doing sufficient restoration treatments so that -- even if a high-severity wildfire occurs -- the forest's flammable fuels will be reduced enough that a burned forest area will still have green, surviving mature trees; and forest watersheds will still be healthy and undamaged.**

Shifting local conifer forests back toward that historic, natural condition means greatly reducing the density of trees and increasing the survival of large, old trees. To do that, forest treatments need to convert the forest to be primarily scattered **individual** trees, mixed with **clumps** or patches of trees, along with various sizes of **open** areas. Scientists call those "ICO" conditions, and that was the general pattern found in historic surveys done in pine and mixed conifer forests across the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. That was before settlers, miners, and loggers began to suppress wildfires.

With a broad diversity of YSS stakeholders all endorsing or accepting the SERAL Project approach, it might seem that the Forest Service would simply move to refine it, then approve it, and then get to work. Forest management is not that simple. The Stanislaus Forest is required to carefully take every project through a detailed planning process, Forest officials in this case also decided to add into the SERAL Project some controversial aspects in addition to the fuel reduction actions. The Forest staff chose to include the implementation of a long-debated conservation strategy plan for the CA Spotted Owl. Some organizations who normally don't comment on projects within the YSS area quickly weighed in with strong objections to those new spotted owl strategies. At the other end of the spectrum, forest industry interests questioned whether the Forest Service should accept the recommendations from YSS for keeping low-controversy diameter limits that restrict the logging of large trees in the project area.

In comment letters submitted to the Forest Service, some groups also raised concerns that the Forest Service appeared to be promoting "condition-based" approval for prescribed burning and invasive weed treatments. "Condition-based" planning in this project would allow the Forest Service to be pre-approved for applying prescribed fire, noxious weed treatments, and perhaps other treatments – all without first identifying exactly where on the landscape those treatments would be done. **For prescribed burns and for treating invasive weeds, most forest interests are willing to trust the Forest Service to do acceptable actions. But broad trust of the agency is not there when it comes to nebulous logging treatments, road treatments, and other controversial project actions.**

After all the strategizing by YSS and the intensive discussions between YSS and the Forest Service, the bottom line is fairly basic. If the Forest Service will avoid creating controversy with condition-based logging planning, CSERC believes the widespread, negative effects of drought, bark beetles, and large, destructive wildfires are more of a threat to our region's forests than erring on the side of allowing increased USFS forest thinning, mastication, and biomass treatments.

Here are three updates about issues that affect the local region

No final decision yet in CSERC's litigation against the USFS over livestock violations

In 2017, CSERC sued the U.S Forest Service over the its repeated failure to enforce the agency's range management regulations and its failure to protect water quality from livestock contamination. That lawsuit was filed after years of unsuccessful CSERC efforts to convince the Forest Service to do required field monitoring and to take steps to prevent resource damage. The lawsuit was based on years of photo evidence (such as at right) by CSERC biologists as well as water quality data from streams that were contaminated in multiple years.

A final court ruling on that lawsuit is still pending. In the meantime, CSERC continues meadow monitoring and stream sampling to identify areas with over-grazing or water quality violations. While the lawsuit is specific to three grazing allotments within the Stanislaus National Forest, livestock impacts to resources and water quality are pervasive across the federal lands of the West.



Water Board plans to allow suction dredging

Recreational suction dredging in search of gold in streams and rivers of the state has often resulted in muddy water, damage to streambanks, and the re-suspension of mercury after it is stirred up from deposits in the streambed. This summer **CSERC staff has been one of a limited number of groups to engage with the Water Board as it considers reauthorizing suction dredging after years of a suction dredging moratorium.** In order to protect water quality and aquatic wildlife species, CSERC firmly opposes any reauthorization of suction dredging in the streams or rivers of the local region.

Yosemite reservation system goes smoothly

Due to COVID-19 and the goal to minimize social contact, Yosemite initiated a day-use reservation system requiring visitors to get a permit online in order to enter the Park. Those with reservations at Park lodging or a campground are automatically given day-use permits. Adjustments have been made by the Park in an effort to make the permit system effective, while still showing sensitivity to visitors. Crowding is clearly reduced. Based on CSERC's monitoring, the permit system appears to be working effectively with good public acceptance.



Conservation needs to mimic the “Clothespin tree” in the Mariposa Grove – that still perseveres despite fires, droughts, and storms

Over centuries, the Clothespin Tree was intensely burned by wildfires – probably many times. Much of its core trunk is now gone. Its large opening led to its name. Yet somehow this “giant” of a sequoia continues to survive and thrive. It’s a powerful example of preserverance – of not succumbing.

The Northern Yosemite region has suffered severely over the past decade. There have been highly destructive wildfires, drought and bark beetles, too much diversion of water from local rivers, and all of the “normal” problems of air pollution, development, clearcuts on private timberlands, and other threats to nature.

For issue after issue, CSERC has worked as a strong, yet respectful, conservation advocate for water, wildlife, and wild places. Our staff shows up prepared, informed, and ready to defend our region’s precious places and resources.

Many of you have partered with us for years – joining with CSERC to stand up for our goals. We continue to be steadfast in our advocacy and our passion for this vast region.



CSERC’S ON-GOING EFFORTS DEPEND ON THE SUPPORT OF MEMBERS LIKE YOU

Name _____ E-mail (optional) _____

Address _____

Donation: __\$30 __\$50 __\$100 __\$250 __\$500 __other (monthly giving option is available on website)

Donations can be mailed to:

**CSERC
Box 396
Twain Harte, CA 95383**

or you can donate online at

www.cserc.org

Questions? (209) 586-7440

Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center (CSERC)
P.O. Box 396
Twain Harte, CA 95383
(209) 586-7440 e-mail: info@cserc.org

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit #113
Sonora, CA 95370

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Fall may be the time to find your magic spot and maybe even avoid the crowds



The pandemic has sparked a surge of recreational use on public lands. Many newcomers are camping, hiking or backpacking into wild areas or visiting popular river destinations and developed sites such as Pinecrest Lake and Lake Alpine. As more people enjoy nature, hopefully they will add their voices to efforts to protect it.

Unfortunately, at sites such as Pinecrest Lake, pulses of visitors have meant extra trash and litter. To ensure employee safety in this time of COVID-19, the Forest Service has tried to minimize employee contacts with the public – leaving some areas with minimal supervision. And on hot summer weekends, visitors have taken advantage of nearly every spot – even far distant from highway corridors. Fall may be the time to slip out into a wild area for a less crowded adventure.