



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.

Field surveys help to identify where at-risk species need protection



CSERC staff members Caitlyn Rich and Sara Husby are shown doing surveys for aquatic species in a local national forest stream. The different sizes of western pond turtle that they located along the stream prove that turtles were at least reproducing at the site - despite declining turtle populations in the Sierra Nevada overall.

The tiny turtle in Caitlyn's hand (at left) shows how small and vulnerable young turtles can be. The priority focus for doing an aquatic survey at this stream was to search for the difficult-to-locate foothill yellow-legged frog, which has disappeared from much of its historic habitat in the region. One of the rare frogs was indeed spotted, but it managed to avoid getting its picture taken.

To read more about the wide range of fieldwork that CSERC is doing this summer as part of our conservation efforts, see page 3.

Legal negotiations continue for two Highway 120 development projects



At the very end of December last year, Tuolumne County supervisors and planning staff rushed two highly controversial “leapfrog” development projects through hearings by the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.

The two projects would be built along Highway 120 on the undeveloped site shown at left. **CSERC opposed both projects because the site was designated for timber management, not development. Neither project has public water or sewer; and the site is located far from any fire suppression facility or other public services, so both projects would place guests in harm’s way by developing on a highly flammable site.**

On the south side of the highway, **Yosemite Under Canvas** proposes a “glamping” resort with 99 high-end tent structures – most of which contain bathrooms. Under Canvas has built and operated similar “upscale safari-inspired accommodations” outside Yellowstone and other national parks.

On the north side, the **Terra Vi Lodge** would cater to Yosemite region guests with a resort hotel that would feature 100 lodge rooms plus cabins providing another 26 units. There would be employee housing, 286 parking spaces, a market, restaurant/bar, and all the noise and congestion of a large facility.

Especially disturbing to CSERC were the actions taken by Tuolumne County officials to ram through approvals for both projects at the very end of December - just before three board members left office. The overwhelming majority of citizens who testified at project hearings voiced strong opposition. But County decision-makers ignored critics and pointed to tax revenues as their priority.

CSERC partnered with property owners along Sawmill Mountain Road and with other concerned Highway 120 corridor citizens to file legal challenges to both projects. Despite frustration with how Tuolumne County handled the planning process, CSERC has been willing to meet with the development interests in both lawsuits to discuss potential legal options.

As of the printing of this newsletter, both lawsuits are inching forward while talks continue.

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***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.***

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Lots of fieldwork and monitoring to squeeze in during the summer

Forest Fieldwork Fanatics

Once again, this season CSERC staff is out doing a wide range of fieldwork and monitoring to support our advocacy and conservation efforts. We do meadow monitoring to assess livestock impacts to meadow grasses, streambanks, and wetlands. We are doing highly technical water quality monitoring -- applying state mandated sampling protocols to get water quality data for selected forest streams.

Each week our staff sets up or maintains baited photo-detection cameras as part of our rare wildlife surveys, and when we can find the time, we also do forest watchdog monitoring. We may assess where poorly maintained forest roads are causing sediment to erode into forest streams; or we may check out private forest clear-cut logging sites or USFS thinning logging sites; or we may look at areas sprayed with herbicides as part of reforestation projects.

Our staff has an extremely busy summer schedule, but we are excited to share our work with you!

You can see what our staff is doing by following us on Instagram [@cserc_conservation](#) or by following us on [Facebook](#).



Is the charismatic porcupine on the brink of disappearing from the Sierra Nevada region?

Almost everyone is familiar with the slow-moving porcupine and the sharp quills it relies on for protection.

Porcupines were historically so widely abundant across the Sierra Nevada region that **from the 1930's through the 1970's, managers of private timberlands and national forest officials frequently paid bounties to those who would hunt, trap, or poison porcupines.**

Porcupines were considered pests because they often chewed the tops of planted conifers on sites with young tree plantations (created after clearcuts). As a result, the chewed young pines or firs would either be stunted or would sprout two or more trunks, diminishing the lumber value of the tree.



photo credit - Peggy Sells

Roughly 20 years ago, CSERC staff started focusing on why we never saw any porcupines despite spending countless days each year doing forest monitoring and fieldwork. We began collaborating with agency wildlife biologists to assess whether perhaps there were lots of porcupines, but that somehow, we just weren't seeing them. We were surprised to learn that some biologists in the Sierra Nevada had spent 25 years or more doing wildlife work, but they had never seen a single porcupine. Forest Service regional sighting reports were very low, and state and federal wildlife agencies also had few detections to report.



In 2010-2012 CSERC launched a well-publicized outreach campaign asking for reports of porcupine sightings or reports of dogs with quills and subsequent treatments by veterinarians. Over those three years, across thousands of square miles of conifer forest, reports to CSERC documented only 24 live porcupine sightings and 9 road kills. A state wildlife study with 750 trail cameras at conifer forest sites over nine years got only 7 porcupine detections – also a very low rate.

After so many years spent attempting to document sightings, the result is that porcupine observations are very limited. Some have been detected far from what is considered to be suitable habitat. Instead of being where they can gnaw on the cambium layer under the bark of conifers (photo at left), they may be found in foothill brush fields or out in blue oak woodlands. At this time, porcupines appear to be rare overall in the conifer forests of the Northern Yosemite region, and there is no evidence their numbers are rebounding. But you can help.

Here is your CSERC-member homework assignment for the summer:

Nearly all of the intentional killing of porcupines in the Sierra Nevada ended 40-50 years ago. So why are their numbers still extremely low when they are no longer being targeted and there are even more conifer trees across the mountain range for them to chew on than there was prior to forest management?

Recovery from past lethal management practices has not been successful so far. Wildlife experts have noted that porcupine pairs typically only produce one kit (young) per year, so the species does have a very low reproductive rate. But that does not seem to provide the answer for their low population numbers.



One prime possibility is that porcupines may be highly susceptible to disease such as canine or feline distemper that can be widely spread by domestic pets. It is also possible that foreign parasites were somehow introduced into California and that porcupines may be especially vulnerable.

Despite speculation about causes, at this time the only clear information we have is that porcupines are extremely rare across most of the Sierra Nevada region. Each year nearly all the reports of sightings that CSERC receives come from the Lake Tahoe basin. Porcupines are still plentiful enough there that people can occasionally see one in their yard or spot them in forest areas along roads. But in our Northern Yosemite region, we receive extremely few reports of porcupine sightings.

This is where your homework assignment comes in. We are asking CSERC members this summer to contact us with any porcupine sightings or secondhand reports. Ideally, please try to get a photo with a cell phone or camera to verify the sighting. But passing along solid reports even without evidence is still important for our staff to document.

Help CSERC (and the biologists we partner with) to get new information about the places where porcupines can still be found. [Contact Caitlyn](#) of our staff at our CSERC office (209) 586-7440 or at: caitlynr@cserc.org

CSERC prepares to restart volunteer workdays – Please sign up!



Prior to the pandemic and all the restrictions on public gatherings, one of the ways that CSERC members helped make a difference was by volunteering at workdays.

Over the years volunteers have partnered with CSERC staff to construct wire fences around degraded meadows or to set up electric fences to exclude livestock. Volunteers have pulled invasive weeds, planted conifer seedlings in burned areas, cleared trails, picked up trash, and done a wide range of other needed efforts.

Now volunteer opportunities are finally returning. CSERC was recently informed by our Forest Service contacts that the agency is ready for volunteer projects to start up again in the national forest. After careful consideration, CSERC's Board of Directors evaluated health issues and state criteria before developing a strategy for how CSERC will launch our volunteer workdays this field season.

At this time, to ensure the highest degree of safety for all those participating, CSERC is requiring that volunteers this summer be fully vaccinated and be willing to verify.

Year after year CSERC volunteers have ended workdays with thanks for enabling them to join with others to do restoration projects or other activities. Volunteers make new friends, learn about forest issues, and almost always have a fun time despite often working hard physically to complete the tasks. We hope that YOU will join in the camaraderie and satisfaction of doing meaningful work that benefits the forest environment.



We hope you will take advantage of this invitation to get on our list of CSERC volunteers for projects this summer and fall.

Sign up now to be notified of workdays as they are planned and scheduled.

Contact Sara at:
sarahusby@cserc.org or
(209) 586-7440 (office).



Local Regional Forester Randy Moore named Chief of the Forest Service

For the past 14 years CSERC and a wide range of forest interests in California have met often with Regional Forester Randy Moore. In 2007 Randy quickly charmed those who interacted with him on a regular basis. He knew the details of forest issues. He made each person feel that their views had his attention. And his responses and balanced approach gained respect for his leadership of the Forest Service here in Region 5.

It wasn't a surprise when Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently announced that **Randy will become the new Chief of the Forest Service** – the 20th Chief in the agency's history.

Over the time that Randy has been Regional Forester, CSERC has had a straightforward and direct relationship with him at countless meetings, field sessions, and even one-to-one discussions. We've often shared our strong frustrations about the agency, and he's been equally blunt about what he was or wasn't able or willing to do in response to our requests.

Prior to last December, Randy's Deputy Regional Forester was **Barnie Gyant**, another straight talker and charismatic leader with the Forest Service. Barnie was often given the tough assignment to go out to local national forests areas where controversy was high and where critics were demanding Forest Service action.



At one such pivotal field session (*photo at left*) Barnie was grilled by environmentalists, county supervisors, loggers, and others from the Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions stakeholder group. YSS members criticized the Forest Service for failing to live up to its widely touted goal of increasing the pace and scale of forest treatments.

Rather than accepting blame, Barnie turned the discussion around and basically put responsibility in the hands of the YSS to step up, take more responsibility, and to get grants and other funding to do the work the Forest Service wasn't capable of doing. That session resulted in YSS taking on significantly more projects and plans.

In December, amidst the new political climate and a time of change in Washington, D.C., **Barnie moved there to accept the position of Associate Deputy Chief for the National Forest System**. Now Randy will be joining him.

The two of them will once again be partners in efforts to build support for agency programs and to gain greater public trust. CSERC has high hopes that their likeability and expert knowledge of the issues can help the agency more consistently reach its goals at a time when so much is at stake.

Agencies assess options for Ackerson Meadow restoration project



As noted in past newsletters, [Ackerson Meadow is one of the region's largest, most iconic meadows](#). Located partly on national forest lands, the majority of the meadow was transferred to the Park from private ownership a few years ago. Ackerson Meadow is a prime site for birders due to the rich diversity of bird species that can be found in the meadow or in the surrounding adjacent forest.

CSERC staff has observed rare, great gray owls as they've hunted for prey or watched us cautiously from perches in trees near the meadow. Our wildlife photo-detection cameras have photographed a wide range of animals. And the site is popular for hikers wanting to explore a scenic landscape close to a main road.

Sadly, various human actions over the past century have severely degraded the meadow condition. Historic agricultural use and decades of livestock effects caused the stream that meanders through the meadow complex to “down-cut” – resulting in a giant steep, eroded gully. Significant portions of the once-wet meadow habitat now dry out prematurely due to the deep gully (a portion is shown in the photo below).



Federal agencies began planning for restoration with consideration of three different treatment strategies.

The **preferred action** was to use heavy equipment to completely fill the 28 acres of the giant eroded gully with soil from forest areas outside of the meadow. A **second option** would be to construct hundreds of short (3 feet high) hand-built structures all along the stream corridor to capture stream sediment and make at least some improvement in meadow restoration. The **third option** was a hybrid of the first two alternatives.

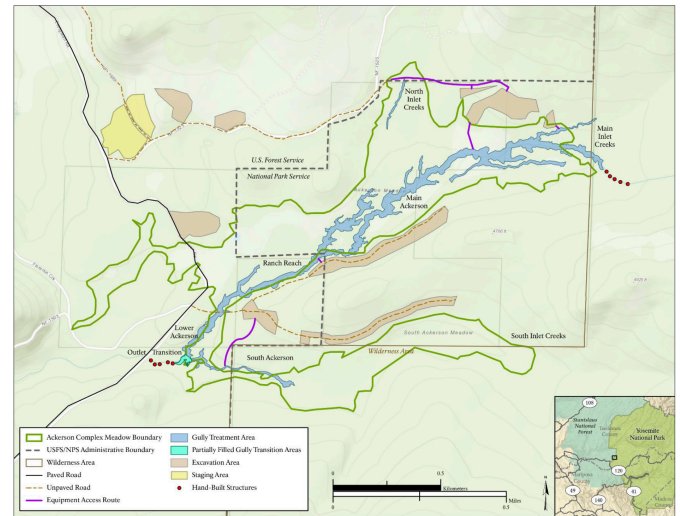


FIGURE 2-1. ALTERNATIVE 1 - FULL GULLY FILL

In early June, federal agency staff released an **Environmental Assessment** that analyzed the predicted effects of each of three alternative options for restoring Ackerson Meadow.

After review, **CSERC supports Alternative 1**. It does have potential for negative short-term impacts due to the huge amount of heavy equipment work that is needed to fill in the giant gully. However, the EA determines that **Alternative 1 would produce by far the greatest overall wildlife and ecosystem benefits and the highest amount of rewetted dry meadow**.

Due to the unique and significant wildlife and ecosystem values of this prime meadow and its adjacent meadow complexes, CSERC advocates for the federal agencies to select the alternative that provides the greatest degree of restoration possible.

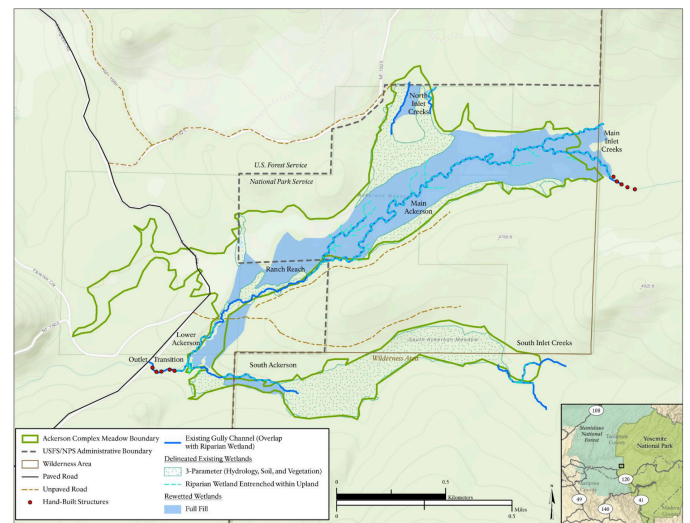


FIGURE 3-2. WETLANDS REWETTED UNDER ALTERNATIVE 1

Comments can be made online through July 8th at the National Park Service PEPC website.



Participation in local stakeholder groups demands lots of time, but it builds key connections that increase chances for success

On a recently ‘site-prepped’ project site within the 2013 Rim Fire burn area, the diverse group at right stood in the glare of the hot summer sun. Their discussions focused on the many challenges that arise when attempting to reforest thousands of acres of severely burned national forest lands. The field trip was led by the [Yosemite Stanislaus Solution \(YSS\) stakeholder group](#), which has partnered for more than a decade with the Forest Service in efforts to gain extra funding for needed forest projects.



YSS is just one of the three local stakeholder collaborative groups that CSERC engages in regularly as a key participant. In the past few years YSS has managed to gain funding for more than \$18 million dollars of local region projects - ranging from wildfire fuel reduction work, tree planting, meadow restoration, wildlife habitat enhancement, and prep work for prescribed burning. John of the CSERC staff serves on the YSS Leadership Team, and this year he is vice-chair for YSS.

A second forest stakeholder group - [the Amador Calaveras Consensus Group \(ACCG\)](#) - deals with the northern portion of the Stanislaus Forest and the southern portion of the Eldorado Forest. The third stakeholder group ([the Tuolumne-Stanislaus Integrated Regional Watershed Management Authority \(IRWMA\)](#)) brings water interests together to work for watershed protection, water infrastructure projects, and ways to increase efficiency for the utility districts and other water providers of our region.



The names for the three collaborative groups seem lengthy and nebulous. But what matters is that **the stakeholder interests in all three collaboratives have built respectful alliances to support the goals that all group participants share.**

In the forest groups, that goal focuses on the desire to plan and implement far more projects in order to get forests back in a healthier, less hazardous condition. In the IRWMA group, key goals are to ensure that all water users have their basic water needs met and that water purveyors gain critical grant support to keep their systems operating. CSERC’s role in all three groups has helped gain grant funds and greater tolerance of competing views.

Please **"PASS THIS NEWSLETTER ON"**

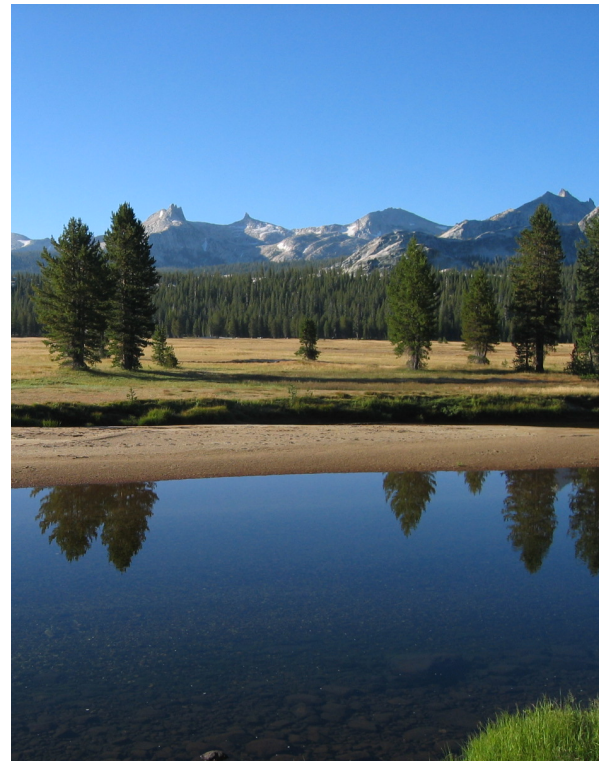
If you are reading this, you likely recognize how important CSERC's work is for the water, wildlife, and wild places of the vast Northern Yosemite region.

CSERC relies entirely on grants and individual donations.

Because grants are so uncertain, CSERC needs to build a sufficient base of donors whose contributions can assure our Center of having enough funds each year to apply to our advocacy, fieldwork, media efforts, educational outreach, lawsuits when necessary, and so much more.

Please pass this newsletter on to a family member, neighbor, friend, co-worker, or someone else who may see value in our efforts to achieve balanced solutions.

Our goal is to gain 100 new members by September 15th.



Have you donated to CSERC in the past year?

The goal of donating is for your contribution to support work that truly makes a difference. CSERC works on the frontlines of advocacy – often as the only environmental organization participating in key land planning, water, and wildlife issues that affect our vast region.

CSERC consistently makes a meaningful difference for nature, recreation, and the legacy for this region that we will collectively leave for future generations.

CSERC'S EFFORTS DEPEND ON THE SUPPORT OF MEMBERS LIKE YOU

Name _____ E-mail (optional) _____

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

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The status or fate of our region's gray wolf visitor is a mystery

After decades of trapping, poisoning, and hunting, wolves were extirpated from California in the 1920's. In 2011, a gray wolf known as OR-7 entered the state from Oregon. Since then a limited number of other wolves have also been detected in far Northern California.

In March, for the first time in 100 years, a wolf was confirmed here in our local region. OR-93, a wolf collared last year in far northern Oregon traveled south past Tahoe into the Stanislaus Forest, then over to the eastside, and then back into Tuolumne County before he headed further south.

By April radio detections showed OR-93 had left the Fresno area, crossed interstate highways, and traveled south of Monterrey into San Luis Obispo County. Since April 5th no radio transmissions have been detected, and his fate is uncertain. He could have been shot as has happened previously as wolves have reoccupied areas of historic habitat in the state, but hopefully his collar has just failed.

