

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.



CSERC juggles field season work with many other intense demands

Our staff does many of our efforts year-round, but mid-spring to mid-fall is by far the Center's busiest season for doing forest watchdog monitoring, leading restoration workdays, surveying meadow impacts caused by livestock, and engaging in all the normal work of stakeholder groups, agency meetings, water issues, and so much more.

In this issue we highlight our frequent monitoring of Yosemite Park, where this year a shortened day-use reservation system and a higher number of reservations led to even more visitors to the crowded Park.



We also describe the puzzling status of porcupines – within our local region and elsewhere across the forests of California. In our work doing restoration workdays on public lands of the local region, Chelsea of our staff highlights the many successful volunteer projects that she led (plus one opportunity still to come).



Cierra (who rejoined our staff to boost our capacity for the field season) describes growing interest for reintroducing beavers into the region where their aquatic habitat engineering might provide benefits.

Stan and Tom summarize some of CSERC's watchdog monitoring efforts, and they also provide some compelling photos and descriptions of wildlife that we managed to entice to come to our cameras.

And sadly, amidst all the positive efforts, we also describe the Administration's proposals to gut the Roadless Rule (that protects precious wild areas), to downsize federal land agencies, and to weaken many key national conservation policies. The challenges for nature on federal lands are rampant and significant.

Details of the long-awaited, massive MAC Project are finally released

Over the past three years, CSERC and other members of the diverse Amador Calaveras Consensus Group (ACCG) held multiple meetings each month to attempt to find consensus for a gigantic project to be done on national forest lands of the region.

There were times when loggers, water agencies, environmentalists, the Forest Service, local landowners, and other stakeholders openly pressed for forest treatments and actions that best met their specific interests. But over and over, a spirit of collaboration prevailed, and all sides made necessary concessions to eventually come to consensus agreement.



Those agreements include no logging in roadless areas, protection for large, old trees, a low amount of herbicide use, widespread layout of fuel breaks, up to 79,000 acres of forest thinning, 42,000 acres of fuel reduction treatments, and lots of prescribed fire. A key goal is to reduce the risk of damaging fires.

The Project was categorized by the Forest Service as an emergency plan that speeds decision-making and only allows for analysis of the action alternative or no project at all. While that could have been highly controversial, at least at this point, Eldorado Forest and the Stanislaus Forest officials have kept intact the consensus agreements that the ACCG group worked so hard to achieve over the many years of planning.

Credit for getting the project to this stage goes to the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority (UMRWA), which invested funding to help do essential planning and surveys for the project.

In coming weeks, the Forest Service will review public comments submitted on the proposed action. As it is currently planned, CSERC supports the overall MAC Project as consistent with ACCG agreements.



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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
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Golden State Natural Resources shifts from plan to ship wood pellets overseas to using biomass for broadly supported uses



Over recent years, there was a mixture of responses to a proposal by Golden State Natural Resources (GSRN) to collect massive amounts of waste wood from forest projects and from mills. Thousands of piles of wood waste (biomass) - such as shown in the photo at left - are created each year throughout local forests.

The GSRN plan was to process the biomass into pellets to ship to markets overseas. Some critics decried the plan for burning wood, even though the massive amount of waste wood is normally just burned anyway, out in the open in the forest.

CSERC reached out to GSRN to strategize about ways the massive amount of biomass that is not productively utilized might be put to a use with less controversy. In part due to changes in market economics, but primarily to develop a biomass project that can gain broad public support, **GSRN publicly abandoned the overseas wood pellet plan and shifted to focus on turning biomass into wood chips.**

Wood chips and other waste wood material have the potential to be converted into alternative fuels or into alternative wood products such as oriented strand board. The challenge is to find a strategic use for the wood chips that can at least cover the expenses of collection, production, and distribution of the end-product. At this time, GSRN is attempting to design and find funding **for a wood products innovation campus to be located in Tuolumne County.** It would provide space and equipment for a wide range of start-up efforts to make profitable uses of woody waste materials. CSERC has openly endorsed the GSRN proposal to create a local wood products innovation campus and to begin testing ways to sustainably use forest biomass.

A completely separate multiple-use biomass facility called Tuolumne Biomass LLC (shown at right) is already operating in the local area. That facility utilizes a small, but meaningful, portion of the enormous amount of waste wood biomass that is otherwise continuing to be burned in piles in the local forest without providing any public value.

As work ramps up on already approved large landscape forest projects, huge amounts of biomass will be produced. The need to make good use of the waste material becomes even more important.



CSERC continues a field season packed with meadow monitoring, wildlife surveys, and other important watchdog activities

From mid-spring through mid-fall, CSERC staff is fully engaged, juggling diverse field activities with all our other regular work. But it's these boots-on-the-ground efforts that keep our staff well informed, giving us well-deserved credibility with agencies and our other partners.

With our regular meadow visits, we've continued our commitment to **monitor livestock grazing** on the Stanislaus Forest. We monitor more than 60 meadows in 14 different allotments, many times more than what the USFS range management staff will actually visit in any given season.



Overgrazing is a common violation that we often report.



Streambank chiseling by cattle over time can lead to increased erosion, deep gullies, and drying meadows.

In our surveys, we measure meadow grasses and take photos at established locations. We do this work before, during, and after the grazing season – not only so we can compare the effects of grazing, but also so we can alert range staff when issues arise – hopefully before significant resource damage occurs.

We particularly monitor the effects of livestock grazing on special aquatic features such as streams, seeps, and fens. When we observe unacceptable resource damage issues, we press the USFS staff to require the cattle to be moved. In some cases, we help the Forest staff by erecting or maintaining fences to protect meadow areas.

This season, our fence work efforts effectively protected five sensitive meadows from livestock impacts. That meadow protection is some of the most meaningful work we accomplish, which is why we hope to add new fence projects to our list of commitments next year (*see volunteer opportunities on page 7*).

Cattle trespass is another issue that can only be detected by consistent field monitoring out in the forest. This year we observed multiple livestock trespass violations again at Bourland Meadow, where cattle grazing is prohibited within the Research Natural Area.



With only one wildlife biologist left on the entire Stanislaus Forest, our **wildlife surveys** have become even more valuable to help with forest management. So far this year, we've set-up and maintained nine sets of survey stations – 42 cameras in total – in all four districts of the local Forest.

At just one photo station this summer, we had an incredible diversity of species visit our camera. A Pacific fisher, ringtail cat, mountain lion, and bobcat are pictured below. Also visiting the same station were a mamma bear and cubs, gray fox kits, chipmunks, gray squirrels, opossum, and a striped skunk.



We also monitored active timber sales

This summer, logging operations in the local Forest were at the highest level in many years. CSERC staff visited timber sales to report praise to USFS staff for those that visibly met requirements, and we raised concerns where we found issues that needed to be resolved. Some of the logging and fuel reduction operations deserved high marks based on our monitoring visits.



14 successful and fun volunteer restoration workdays completed!



Quail Meadow

Multiple days were spent working to rebuild the protective exclosure fence and removing invasive weeds -- thanks to a Schwemm Family Foundation grant.



Ackerson Meadow

We planted native vegetation and helped to stage thousands of starts for later planting – all in partnership with the Yosemite Park staff.

One of the highlights for our entire staff is when we get to work side by side with our dedicated and hardworking volunteers on a restoration workday. This page and the next show some of the workdays that CSERC already held this year, each one achieving meaningful work that benefits meadows, wildlife, water resources, or other important resources.

Over the course of a field season, the range of projects is likely to match the interest and capabilities of almost anyone. Some workdays in rugged terrain can be physically demanding. Others, such as doing seed collection, can provide casual opportunities for helping with almost no physical effort – all in a scenic setting.



Wet Meadow Springs

A number of workdays were spent removing invasive weeds and repairing the exclosure fence.



At multiple healthy meadow sites, volunteers and staff collected native plant seeds to use later to revegetate degraded meadows.



Trail of the Gargoyles

The workday project rehabilitated the trail and replaced interpretive signs.

There's still time this season to sign up to become a CSERC volunteer!



Multiple Meadow Sites
Native plant seed collection



Sapps Meadow
Removing thousands of encroaching conifers

The extra hands of our energetic volunteers are essential to help CSERC restore and protect some of the at-risk, precious places in our region. The positive, “can-do” attitude our volunteers display is contagious! **So far this year, 57 volunteers have donated nearly 350 hours to help complete important projects in our local area, in many cases making a long-lasting, positive impact.**

As this newsletter goes to print, our next scheduled volunteer restoration workday is planned to be at Ackerson Meadow on Thursday, October 16th. If you are interested in joining us for that workday event, or if you would like to learn more about being a CSERC volunteer, please contact Chelsea of our staff at chelsea@cserc.org or call (209) 586-7440. Space is limited for our Ackerson Meadow volunteer workday, so RSVP right away!



Quail Meadow



Trail of the Gargoyles



Wet Meadow Springs

Beavers – There's increased local interest in nature's wetland engineers



Photo by Robes Parrish/USFWS

Beavers (*Castor canadensis*) are the largest rodent species in North America. Adult beavers can weigh up to 40 pounds and measure more than three feet in length. They are a keystone species, helping to create and maintain diverse habitats throughout California. Historically, the beaver population in the US was close to 100–200 million. Yet, human exploitation and eradication of the species make local sightings few and far between.

Recently, beavers have transitioned from being viewed as a potential nuisance species to increasingly being viewed for creating a wide range of ecological benefits on the landscape. Local wildlife activists have been energized in recent years with a goal to reintroduce beavers into our region so they can help naturally restore wetland habitats that benefit so many species. With the stick/mud dams that they build along streams, beavers can help divert water into floodplains, thus raising water levels in areas that may otherwise be dry.

Over recent decades, beaver sightings have been rare occurrences for most who spend time outdoors in our vast local region. Yet they are still out there, waiting to be spotted. Beavers are mostly nocturnal, so your best chance to spot them is at dusk or dawn in stream, river, and lake habitats across our region. As a matter of fact, one of our CSERC staff saw one swimming in the lower Tuolumne River in August of this year!



Photo by Oregon State Dept. of Wildlife

At local forest stakeholder meetings, beaver advocates periodically encourage the collaborative groups and wildlife agencies to look for appropriate sites where beavers could be reintroduced to demonstrate their engineering skills that benefit wetlands and aquatic species.

We'll keep you updated if any local reintroduction plans materialize.

Administration shifts the policy in Yosemite to aim at increasing visitors



Over the past decade, officials in Yosemite National Park openly admitted that the consequences from too many vehicles and visitors were frequent traffic jams, crowding and congestion, plus varying degrees of resource impacts.

In 2022 the Park launched a planning process to create management policies that would allow high numbers of visitors but would still set limits to reduce congestion.

That “years in the making” Visitor Management Plan was shelved by the new Administration. Since then, the Administration pressed some Park employees to retire early and made numerous management changes that led others to resign. All that has stressed the already limited Park Service capacity.

Now the Park Service has shifted to promoting high levels of visitor use instead of limiting vehicles and visitation to levels that staff can readily manage or that won’t harm resources. New Park superintendent Ray McPadden spoke recently before county supervisors to emphasize a Park Service goal of ramping up visitation compared to previous years. That is the opposite view of previous Yosemite Park superintendents.

CSERC has consistently monitored the Park from spring through fall to assess conditions and levels of congestion. Not surprisingly, in late spring we found that by mid-to-late morning, Yosemite Valley and Glacier Point parking lots were full. Some restrooms suffered from inadequate staffing to provide essentials. Even under the shorter day-use-reservation system, we found that parking lots mid-day were almost always beyond capacity. Frustrated drivers parked cars along roads, in between trees, or inching out into meadows. That congestion has resulted, in part, from the Park Service raising the number of daily reservations by 31%, plus a new policy to allow in visitors without reservations starting at 2 p.m. each day.

The new policy direction has meant times with lengthy waits at entrance stations (especially on weekends) along with higher crowding overall than our staff has observed for a number of years. What lies in store for the Park in terms of vehicles and visitor management for next year is still unclear.



The federal administration continues efforts to weaken agencies and to eliminate longstanding environmental policies

With a goal to ramp up timber production and any other conceivable commercial use or extraction on federal lands, the Administration has been working relentlessly to cripple environmental protections and reduce the level of agency staff who oversee those national policies.

Over decades, parties on both sides of the aisle have supported national environmental policies when agencies plan projects on federal lands. But now the leadership in Washington D.C. is pursuing a proposal to significantly weaken the **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** with the stated goal of “streamlining” the federal permitting process. Key directives would limit the scope of environmental review and reduce public involvement. Large projects on federal public land could be planned behind closed doors and only released to the public when it’s already too late to provide key input for protecting natural resources.



At the **Bureau of Land Management (BLM)**, a rule was adopted last year that put “conservation” as an equal use with logging, oil and gas drilling, livestock grazing, mining, OHV access, and more. Now the new Administration proposes to completely rescind that rule – meaning that conservation and environmental restoration projects would again be made a lower priority on BLM land than any commercial use.

At the Forest Service, the Administration is attempting to roll back the 2001 **Roadless Rule**, a critically important environmental policy that has protected 58 million acres of national forest land across America from new road construction, logging, and drilling. The Administration claims that logging and road construction in these wild areas will decrease the risk of damaging wildfires. But CSERC points to research showing that most wildfires are human-caused and often start near roads; and that intact, roadless areas are more fire-resilient – and clearly more beneficial for wildlife habitat, recreation values, and water quality.

So far this year, there have been widespread actions taken by the Administration to maximize economic outputs on federal lands at the expense of water, wildlife, and air quality. Key officials have openly boasted about their intent to purge policies that were previously adopted to reduce climate change impacts.

CSERC is dedicated to defending nature in the Northern Yosemite region



In our work to protect water, wildlife, and wild places in the Northern Yosemite region, CSERC is supported by tax-deductible contributions and private foundation grants.

Many of our members set up recurring donations at our website, either monthly, quarterly, or annually.

Please visit www.cserc.org and click on “Donate” to learn more. **Your support truly matters. Thank you!**

Donating stock can reduce or eliminate capital gains taxes

CSERC recently signed up with a new service that streamlines the complex process of donating stock to charitable organizations like ours. Stock Donator provides support for both sides of the transaction, is free to donors, and charges only a 1.9% fee to non-profit recipients (less than even a credit card fee). To learn more, visit **StockDonator.com** or contact our Center’s program director, Stan Dodson, at stan@cserc.org or (209) 586-7440.

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Have you seen an elusive porcupine? CSERC asks for your help



Despite our staff spending thousands of days over the years out in the local mountains, it is extremely rare for us to ever see a porcupine. As common as they are in stories and in historic accounts, these days they're so rare that their persistence is a cause for concern.

CSERC has periodically been contacted by those who've spotted a porcupine and saw online that we keep track. **Now we are pressing you – our members – to report any sightings you've had in recent years or any new sighting you may have.**

We are partnering with federal and state biologists to compile a sighting database. Please help by sharing any porcupine observations.

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