

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.



It's time to enjoy the summer season. The mountains are calling.



Breathtaking vistas, thundering cascades, purple shooting stars, high country lakes, a watchful marmot...

Countless destinations and inspiring discoveries await you as the summer season unfolds with so many opportunities. The snow has melted, mosquitos are less than normal, and wild places offer new adventures.



Land planning and development – CSERC works to overcome local government indifference and resistance

Unlike in some regions, the scale of new development (and the resulting loss of habitat) in the local region is fairly low. But other county government decisions – and whether policies are enforced – can add up to measurable impacts for open space, rural values, and natural resources.

For years, our staff has carefully reviewed every new development project that's proposed in Tuolumne County and responded with detailed comments. Our staff also monitors to see when land planning requirements may be violated or where county enforcement actions are needed.



Over the years, CSERC staff has repeatedly shown up at key county planning commission sessions and board of supervisor meetings. Instead of being extreme, we've provided comments that aim to balance economic and conservation interests; but most local supervisors still consistently vote on the side opposing conservation values. County officials also often fail to fairly enforce environmental measures.

One example that CSERC dealt with for over two years was the illegal use of a private property that directly conflicted with county requirements. Neighbors voiced outrage. CSERC pressed for action, but month after month county officials failed to act. At long last, without any consequences for the property owner for abusing county requirements, most of the illegal use was curtailed.

In another example, a lodging development project that started to go through the county's planning process began operating with no hearing or permit. CSERC contacted the county to ask why the development was operating without approval. For nearly two months, the county ignored our contacts.

A similar challenge has been getting county officials to enforce county signage regulations. To protect scenic values, local county zoning strictly defines where commercial signs can be located. Commercial signs are not allowed in rural residential districts or on agricultural lands. Yet despite CSERC's repeated notifications to county officials about commercial signs illegally placed along scenic highway areas, the county for months failed to take any enforcement action. **The sign shown in the photo (top right) is one example of illegal signs allowed to stay in place without enforcement of the county's existing regulations.**

***This summer 2026 newsletter
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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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By volunteering you can help make a positive impact for degraded areas on public lands, while also making new friends

The field season is in full swing, and with it, so are CSERC's restoration projects! Thanks to our dedicated volunteers, we've already completed four workday projects that are helping to restore sensitive meadow areas on national forest lands of the local region.

Looking ahead, we have five additional workdays already on the calendar for later this year along with several weather-dependant projects that are still waiting to be scheduled.



While the age-old proverb "many hands make light work" accurately captures the nature of CSERC's restoration workdays, we could add "and many smiles make fun work!" CSERC volunteers and staff are passionate about protecting the environment, but it's also fun to make new friends and learn about those who show up to share the work.

We invite you to join the fun and meet some new friends while working to make a difference for nature in our region. Upcoming volunteer projects include a wide range of tasks ranging from working to repair or construct barbed wire fences around vulnerable meadows to clearing overgrown trails, removing invasive weeds, or collecting and sowing native seeds. There's a diversity of projects, with something for everyone.

So please consider signing up now to volunteer! If you'd like to receive email alerts to know when specific volunteer restoration workdays are scheduled or to get workday information, **email Chelsea at chelsea@cserc.org or call her at (209) 586-7440.** We look forward to partnering with you.



Park leaders welcome crowds and congestion at Yosemite Park

For years Yosemite officials engaged the public in a highly publicized planning process aimed at reducing crowding, congestion, and traffic jams in the Park. All previous Yosemite superintendents for over 20 years have acknowledged that too many vehicles diminish the visitor experience and can result in negative ripple effects for Park resources.

That was before the current Administration. Since early last year, day-use reservation plans at national parks around the country have been halted. “Access” has become the buzz word to justify high levels of visitor use despite insufficient parking, congested roads, and frequent wait times of an hour or more at national park entrance stations.



As we’ve noted in previous newsletters, new Yosemite Park superintendent Ray McPadden has echoed the Administration’s National Park Service policy direction by asserting that access is a priority objective. That policy is narrowly aimed at American citizens, since foreign visitors are being charged \$100 per family member (for those 16 years of age or older) on top of the basic \$35 entry fee to get into any national park. That can result in a family with two teenagers and the parents now having to pay more than \$400 to enter for the day.

Over much of last year and again throughout this spring, CSERC staff has periodically monitored conditions in Yosemite Park. Our photos of overflowing parking lots with “Lot Full” or “No Entry” signs have been shared with a wide range of media. **CSERC’s director has been interviewed for TV news coverage of Yosemite crowding, and our staff has been quoted in more than 25 separate news features about congestion in the Park and what to expect this summer.**



Park officials have stated to the media that those who want a less-crowded Yosemite experience shouldn’t come during the busy season. That fails to consider that allowing unlimited visitors exceeds the capacity of Park staff to protect wildlife and other resources.

CSERC points to mandates that require national parks to not only provide for visitors’ enjoyment, but to also protect resources for future generations. We will continue to monitor and alert the media to what we find as the busy season unfolds.

Mist Trail Corridor Project offers alternatives for public input

The Merced River flows into the eastern end of Yosemite Valley through a series of waterfalls and a narrow gorge known as “The Mist Trail Corridor.” Search and Rescue (SAR) incidents are concentrated in this area. The trail is extremely popular with steep, rugged terrain and sections of wet and slippery stone steps. In 2025, out of 239 SAR incidents parkwide, 69 were in the corridor. Fatalities unfortunately occur.



The trails in the **Mist Trail Corridor** are the busiest in Yosemite National Park. From Happy Isles, the John Muir Trail/Mist Trail winds up to Vernal Fall, Nevada Fall, and on to other distant destinations. Crowding is often heavy during popular times of year.

The Park Service has released a plan with three alternatives for managing the Happy Isles area and for creating a new trailhead for the main trail leading up to Vernal Fall. You can provide input.

Alternative A is “no action” and would keep the current conditions.

Alternative B would divide the vehicle bridge that crosses the river into a vehicle lane and a pedestrian promenade to separate the uses. It would also allow a pilot project that would connect the existing Stock Trail to the Vernal Fall Bridge area so that hikers who don’t want to deal with wet stairs and the steeper section of the Mist Trail could loop back on the Stock Trail to Happy Isles. That would also reduce congestion.

Alternative C would reconstruct a historic pedestrian footbridge stretching from Happy Isles across the river to the main trail to ensure that hikers wouldn’t need to use the vehicle bridge. A new trailhead at Happy Isles would increase the amount of informational displays, and the new site would provide a more attractive trailhead setting. As now proposed, there would be no testing of a Stock Trail loop route in Alternative C.

HERE’S A LINK TO THE PLAN AND HOW TO COMMENT:

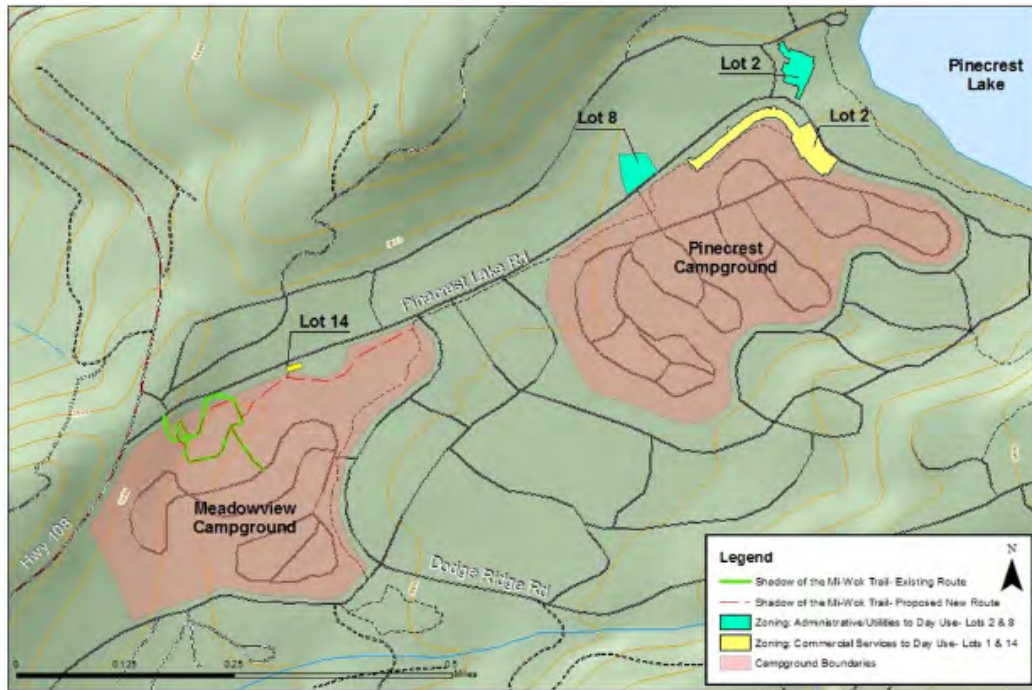
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=105979>

As this newsletter went to press, we were unsure when members would receive it. The deadline for public comment is July 13th, so if you are reading this prior to the deadline, then you still have time to review the Mist Trail Corridor Plan and to submit comments.

Either way, we hope you find it helpful to learn that there is a high potential for major changes at Happy Isles. If the Proposed Action (Alternative C) is adopted, a new bridge for hikers will at some point span the river from a new trailhead at Happy Isles. Both alternatives would upgrade the shuttle stop and restrooms and would improve hiker information displays.



Stanislaus Forest plans to upgrade the campgrounds at Pinecrest Lake



The two campgrounds at highly popular Pinecrest Lake will have major renovation work done under a new plan recently released by the Forest Service. Pinecrest and Meadowview Campgrounds are the two largest campgrounds in the Stanislaus Forest, with 300 campsites. Visitors often fill the campgrounds from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The campgrounds were built in the 1960's, and there are many deficiencies.

CSERC supports the wide range of actions that are proposed in the **Pinecrest Campgrounds Improvement Project**. For Pinecrest Campground, the plan is to remove and rebuild the entrance station, repave the entrance road, and install an informational kiosk near the campground entrance. While the Project will generally retain the same number of overall campsites, a few that negatively impact natural drainage patterns or that cannot meet accessibility standards would be removed or relocated. New picnic tables, fire rings, and wildlife-resistant food lockers would be installed. There will be new host sites along with 36 additional parking spaces.



Meadowview Campground would also be reconstructed. It would have all the same new amenities at the individual campsites, plus it would have 47 new parking spaces.

At each campground, there will be new unisex flush restrooms. Water and sewer lines will be replaced, and split rail fence barriers and native vegetation will be planted to better screen the campsites. The bulk of the Project will be funded by Pacific Gas & Electric Company as part of a hydroelectric relicensing agreement.

New policies undercut conservation, expand off-road motorized use

For many years the **Roadless Rule** has protected wild, roadless areas that are not designated Wilderness. Roadless lands contain priceless ecological values, rare wildlife, and opportunities for recreating in pristine areas. The timber industry, oil and gas interests, and motorized user groups have long sought to gut the Roadless policy.

Soon after the new Administration took office, the Roadless Rule was openly targeted. Since then, a number of legally required procedural steps have been taken toward ending the policy. In Congress, recently proposed legislation would also end roadless area protection affecting 53 million acres of federal lands.



Photo jeep.com

Separate from that policy, there have also been Executive Orders by the President that have weakened protection for air and water resources, diminished long-established limits on oil and gas drilling on sensitive federal lands, and reduced federal requirements for commercial livestock grazing. Then in June a new Executive Order overruled previous federal requirements that had set strict limits for off-road motorized use.



Photo U.S. Forest Service

Often referred to as “Travel Management,” controlling motorized use has long been a challenge for the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The popularity of all-terrain vehicles and 4-wheel-drive vehicles has soared over recent decades. Their use can result in significant impacts for wildlife, quiet recreation, water quality, and other values on public lands.

Under both President Richard Nixon and President Jimmy Carter, federal land policies were established to limit off-road vehicle use to only areas where their use would not significantly damage soil, vegetation, watersheds, wildlife, and other resources. CSERC has repeatedly pointed to those travel management rules when we’ve found violations occurring on local national forest lands.

In June, President Trump signed a new Executive Order rescinding the Nixon and Carter travel management policies that required off-road use to minimize impacts to other resources and non-motorized recreation. The new Executive Order claims those limits were “unnecessary and excessive” policies. Now the Forest Service and BLM are being directed to “maximize” motorized access to satisfy off-road use interests.

CSERC's wildlife surveys in old growth stands reveal a diversity not found in younger forest areas

CSERC installs and maintains motion-sensitive wildlife cameras throughout the Stanislaus Forest year-round. The camera stations are set up for at least 30 days, but not much longer, so every year we survey many different areas and habitat types in our local national forest.

We partner with Forest Service and Yosemite Park biologists to help find rare species – including the Pacific fisher – an endangered species that over the last two years CSERC has proven to exist in new areas of the forest. **Fishers are a species that thrive in old growth forest conditions, and our wildlife surveys are showing that other species do as well.**



Since February we've been maintaining camera stations in some of the the few remaining old growth stands in the Calaveras District along the Highway 4 corridor. Compared to our surveys done in younger forest stands (where logging occurred decades ago), the old forest conditions have shown a diversity of species that we just don't find elsewhere.



In younger forests we may only have five or six different species visit our cameras, while our recent camera stations in old growth have attracted a dozen or more. Common species included squirrels, deer, gray fox, coyotes, and black bears. While they're not necessarily rare, we also captured photos of the more elusive bobcat, ringtail cat, and western spotted skunk. Most notably we detected northern goshawk and marten (pictured above), whose proven presence can affect management and will help achieve two of CSERC's main goals: to help preserve habitat for rare species and to protect big, old trees.

USFS faces a huge transition for the agency's facilities, research

What began last year as “downsizing” of the Forest Service staff and reductions in the agency’s budget has now shifted into a massive reorganizational change that is sweeping across the national agency.



Photo USFS

A final decision has already been made by the Administration to close all nine of the USFS Regional Offices across the country. Instead of there being a Regional Forester who oversees the management of the national forests in a specific region (such as Region 5 covering California, Hawaii, and part of Nevada), there will now be 15 State Directors who will primarily coordinate with state and tribal interests. A fear of conservation advocates is that having the USFS cater to state interests across the West will result in even more logging, livestock use, and resource extraction.

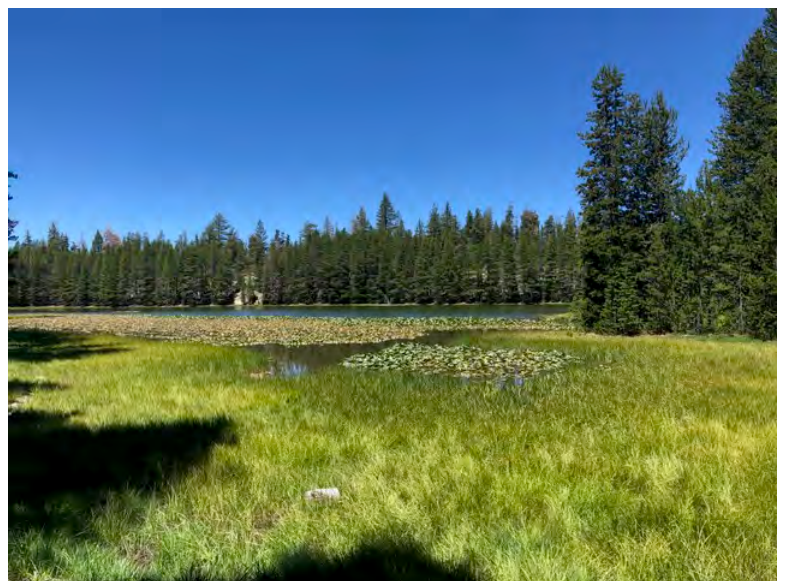
Out of 77 USFS research facilities stretching from coast to coast, 57 will be closed down. It is unclear how that will affect scientific studies that in some cases have been long-term experiments intended to last decades. It is revealing that the President’s draft budget allocates ZERO dollars for USFS research next year.

The funding in the President’s budget for Forest Service staffing and operations also raises alarm due to the proposed reduction in funding by 40% from the current year. Even if Congress allocates closer to normal levels of funds, the message is clear that the USFS will have limited staffing and capacity.

In our local area, after years of planning the massive MAC Project was finally approved – allowing a huge amount of treatments within the Calaveras District of the Stanislaus Forest and the Amador District of the Eldorado Forest. As much as 700 million board feet of sawlogs could be logged, with over 20,000 acres of new fuel breaks constructed along with significant amounts of mastication of brush fields and biomass removal.

CSERC openly supported the MAC Project because the final decision retained all the basic ACCG stakeholder agreements that are intended to protect wild areas, large trees, and at-risk wildlife.

How the approved Project work actually gets implemented, however, is still to be seen. It could be that selling sawlogs for timber production ends up dominating USFS priorities for years into the future. CSERC is actively monitoring current treatments that are being done this summer all across the local national forest.



You may have been to the South Grove in Calaveras Big Trees State Park, but it's truly worth re-visiting

As we drove up from the North Fork Stanislaus River, we saw the bear. We stopped and watched quietly as a small cub emerged from behind the mama bear to mimic her browsing on lush plants. She paid us no notice, so we enjoyed seeing the cub play and practice scampering up the base of a nearby tree.

Just moments before, we'd spotted a huge raptor nest (eagle or osprey) high on the top of a conifer not far from the river. Bright wildflowers were on display, and summer growth was abundant. Despite visiting the South Grove many times, this special place always evokes awe and wonder.



Beaver Creek was rushing as we crossed the footbridge, and within minutes we were exclaiming about the many large conifers along the trail. Once in the South Grove, the previous years of prescribed burning were obvious. Resprouted dogwoods and other deciduous trees and bushes blanketed the forest understory, with scattered impressive sugar pines and incense cedars towering overhead. But the awe-inspiring giant Sequoias were simply spectacular.



The volume of wood in many of the larger Sequoias is beyond easy comprehension. Gigantic trunks don't quickly taper upwards, but instead many of the Sequoia's huge trunks stay thick and huge so that they are still 10' in diameter at a height of 100' or more in the air.

For all who are impressed by longevity and resilience, many of the larger Sequoias defy understanding. They have persevered for 2,000 years despite droughts, wildfires, insects, potential diseases or other threats; and yet tree after tree exhibits exceptionally healthy crowns with gigantic limbs and tops.

And for ancient trees that have withstood fires over centuries, the fact that only a horseshoe-shaped base remains to hold up a colossal fire-scarred trunk and a towering canopy is a tribute to resilience. This is a place to visit in a spirit of reverent awe.

CSERC depends on your support to defend nature in our region



Long-time CSERC members share why they support our work in the Central Sierra

"We donate to CSERC for many reasons, not the least of which are the unceasing efforts of the CSERC staff to monitor the health of our Sierra environment. Through attending endless meetings, monitoring meadows and wildlife, telling the truth about issues that matter, and holding the Forest Service accountable when laws are not followed, CSERC lets us sleep better knowing that someone is watching over the Sierra that we've known and loved all our lives."

– Bev & Sharky, pictured here atop Sonora Peak

CSERC's extensive fieldwork adds credibility to our advocacy

Whether your gift supports our wildlife surveys and meadow restoration work, our years-long efforts to gain better protections for local rivers, or our consistent visits to active forest management projects, your support enables our staff to be in the forest where we can make a difference. **Thank you for your partnership!**

Donating stock to CSERC can reduce or eliminate capital gains taxes

CSERC partners with **StockDonator.com**, a trusted service that streamlines the complex process of donating stock to charitable organizations like ours. To learn more, click "Donate Stock" on our website or contact our Center's program director, Stan Dodson, at stan@cserc.org or at (209) 586-7440.



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What in the world is a ground-cone?



Recently Stan spotted this noteworthy plant near Lyons Reservoir. **Ground-cone** (*Kopsiopsis strobilacea*) is a native parasitic plant species that can easily be mistaken for a fallen pinecone.

Ground-cone does not perform photosynthesis. Instead, it uses specialized roots (haustoria) to attach to and take sugars and nutrients from the roots of Pacific madrone trees and manzanita shrubs. There is currently no scientific evidence that it is harmful to its hosts. It grows in open mixed conifer woodlands and chaparral where madrone trees and manzanita shrubs are present, from central and southern Oregon to Baja California and from sea level to about 6,000 feet in elevation.

CSERC'S SUMMER 2026 NEWSLETTER

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