

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.



Working to defend forests, water, wildlife, and wild places



Sometimes it's hard. It can be frustrating and exhausting. But the work is always a "path of the heart" that ties to CSERC's mission.

And despite the challenges, when successes are gained or when threats to the environment across the vast Northern Yosemite region are reduced or eliminated, it can be truly rewarding.

For 36 years CSERC has attempted to take on every major environmental issue that poses risk to more than 3,000,000 acres of the Northern Yosemite region. That experience and CSERC's goal to show respect for those with different priorities have combined to give us strong credibility with agencies, key decisionmakers, and the media.

In this current difficult time for conservation, we've ramped up our efforts and are striving to do all possible to make a meaningful difference for public lands, water resources, and wildlife.



CSERC joins in nationwide efforts to defend the Roadless Rule



For 25 years, the Roadless Rule has been the policy that's protected over 44 million acres of public lands from clearcut logging, oil and gas drilling, new roads, and development. Since early last year, the current Administration has been pushing to eliminate the Roadless Rule to please industry interests and anti-environmental political allies.

CSERC originally formed with a priority focus on defending wild areas from new road construction and the clearcut logging that was being done all across the forests of the Sierra Nevada. We were instrumental in getting the Forest Service to agree to phase out clearcuts and to halt the construction of new roads into wild, roadless areas. CSERC believes that roadless areas are priceless, pristine legacies to pass on to future generations.

The deadline for submitting comments on this extremely negative national level proposal was extended to October 6th. Accordingly, CSERC did something we'd never done. We sent out multiple email ACTION ALERTS to you, our members, to urge you to take action and submit your comments opposing the rescinding of the Roadless Rule. Thank you to all who submitted comments!

It is not clear when the Administration will make a final decision on this truly pivotal policy.

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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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National level attacks on environmental policies undermine decades of bipartisan conservation measures for public lands

Over CSERC's 36 years of advocacy, **there have never been so many national level attacks on the environment as under this Administration.** Separate from the Administration's proposal to rescind the Roadless Rule, here are examples of major blows to conservation – especially for federal lands.

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT SEVERELY WEAKENED

For 50 years, protecting at-risk wildlife species (such as the wolverine) has been a non-partisan goal. Now this Administration has gravely weakened that policy. **The prohibition against “harm” now excludes destruction of a species’ critical habitat and only prohibits direct killing of wildlife.** Without critical habitat, species won't survive over time. The changes also now allow consideration of economic effects of protecting species; and for species that still get listed as “Threatened,” there is no longer any time frame required for adopting protective measures.



Photo – Peggy Sells

BLM OIL AND GAS RULE REVISED

For millions of acres of Bureau of Land Management lands, the Administration has rescinded a policy to make fossil fuel companies pay a fair share for extracting public resources and cover the costs of clean up and restoration after drilling. This is just one of many examples of policies that benefit oil and gas interests.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES ALSO SIGNIFICANTLY WEAKENED

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has been the bedrock conservation policy for federal lands since the Nixon Administration. It has required solid consideration of projects or actions that may significantly harm the environment. This Administration has made sweeping changes to exclude many projects from NEPA review, reduce opportunities for public engagement, and to define NEPA as “guidance” rather than mandated.



UNPRECEDENTED CHANGES FOR THE FOREST SERVICE

Last year the Administration appointed Tom Schultz of the timber industry to be Chief of the Forest Service. Schultz launched a major “restructuring” of the agency – eliminating Regional Offices, shrinking the workforce, and slashing the number of science research facilities.

New proposals also seek to weaken key **“travel management” regulations** that previously limited resource impacts from cross-country travel by 4-wheel drives, all-terrain vehicles, and snowmobiles. The new plan would repeal those protective measures and make it nearly impossible to stop destructive motorized users from tearing up meadows or driving across streams.

Status of Yosemite Park management still highly frustrating

Past superintendents at Yosemite National Park have pointed to CSERC as the organization with the longest engagement in Yosemite Park planning due to our Center participating in over 35 years of Park plans and projects.

During that time our staff has repeatedly pressed for visitor management that reduces the excessive numbers of vehicles that crowd into the Park. We've also pushed for lowering the number of visitors to align with the capacity of Park staff. Yet this year, instead of having at least six weeks of a day-use reservation system during the height of tourism, the Park Service eliminated day-use reservations.

The result was as expected. On nearly all Saturdays and most Fridays and Sundays, vehicles overwhelmed all available parking in Yosemite Valley and often at Glacier Point as well. CSERC staff frequently spent days monitoring the congestion and crowding – documenting with photos when lots were full and when vehicles ended up being parked illegally in between trees or on meadow edges.



As this newsletter goes to press, the Park is dealing with the Dome Fire east of Wawona, which has burned thousands of acres in forested wilderness terrain. Tragically, a helicopter crash during fire suppression efforts took the lives of two pilots. There have also been other tragic deaths in the Park this year from drownings and falls. Park officials often have delayed confirming such events, plus the Park delayed for months releasing news of the detection of rabies in bats in the Park. Despite it all, the popularity of Yosemite soars.

With a lower number of staff than in previous years, the Park has nevertheless managed to speed up the often-long wait at entrance stations over the summer months. Prior to that time, however, CSERC at times found that there were no employees at the entrance booths; and fees were not being collected.



This year CSERC has also observed and monitored the logging of swaths of forest along main roads in the Park. The treatments (see the cut logs shown at left) are aimed at reducing fire risk by lowering fuel loads and also removing hazardous trees. But the clearing this year of many large, old trees along with many medium and small trees has appeared to be more aggressive than previous actions. CSERC in the past has defended the Park's previous roadside forest thinning treatments for fuel reduction and public safety purposes. We will continue to monitor ongoing projects and actions in the Park.

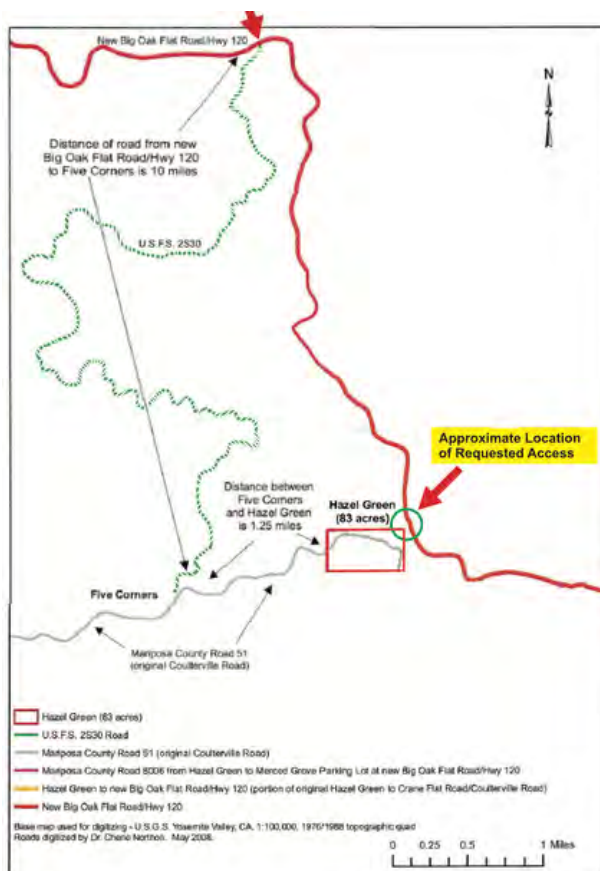
Proposed Yosemite land exchange would result in a problematic development just outside the Park



This photo shows the location of a proposed Yosemite Park land exchange that's being pushed by developers. **They want to gain road access to Highway 120 inside the Park so they can build a major new development on private land not far from the Park's boundary.** It is a boondoggle plan that would set terrible precedent.

The 83-acre private parcel is known as the Hazel Green Ranch. It has no residents and the only access currently is a poor-quality dirt road across 10 miles of national forest. Investors bought the property from a previous owner who failed twice to push through his plans for commercial development on the site.

In August, NOTUS (a political news organization) alerted the public to the land exchange scheme (supposedly thanks to insider leaks from Park Service staff). The developers would get a 1/4-mile-long strip of Yosemite land in exchange for some undefined property "of equal value to the Park Service" that the developers would purchase. Reportedly the land exchange proposal had been working its way through Park Service review at the national level for nearly a year without any public knowledge.



Once the Yosemite land exchange plan was revealed, the outcry was immediate. Media from coast to coast spread the news. California state legislators of both parties signed a joint letter opposing the plan. CSERC's director took part in an hour-long NPR interview along with the reporter who broke the story and with Congressman Jared Huffman, who took on a lead role in garnering political opposition to the proposal.

There is presently not a single occupied cabin or other structure within miles of the property proposed for development. But if the land exchange is approved by the Administration, **the developers intend to build a major resort lodge, 80+ luxury cabins, and high-end residences.** That would mean traffic, night-time lighting, noise, and a wide range of negative effects for wildlife, both on the private parcel and across adjacent areas in the Park.

So far CSERC has responded to more than 30 media contacts concerning the plan. We will continue to be a strong opponent of any development proposed so close to a wild portion of Yosemite Park.

What a productive restoration season – and we're not done!



An invasive weed removal volunteer workday

Thanks to our passionate and dedicated volunteers, 2026 is already a record setting year. So far this field season, CSERC volunteers have donated 425 hours. Wow! Thank you!!

Volunteers have done work to help protect and restore 7 different meadows by removing truckloads of invasive non-native weeds, removing encroaching conifers, building and repairing fences to keep livestock out of fragile meadow habitat, and collecting native seeds to revegetate denuded meadow patches.

In addition, CSERC volunteers assisted the Forest Service with native seed collection before a prescribed burn and helped rehabilitate an interpretive trail. They also helped host CSERC's booth at two different community events to raise environmental awareness.

And, we still have more volunteer restoration projects planned for this season! Restoration work makes a meaningful and lasting positive impact for nature in our region. We have another workday planned in late October assisting Yosemite Park staff with the massive restoration effort at Ackerson Meadow. We'll have at least a couple more opportunities in our local forest for sowing native seeds and taking down enclosure fences around meadows in preparation for winter. We'd love for you to join us if you are able!!



A trail rehabilitation workday

If you would like to sign up to become a CSERC volunteer or would like to learn more, please contact Chelsea of our staff at chelsea@cserc.org or call (209) 586-7440.



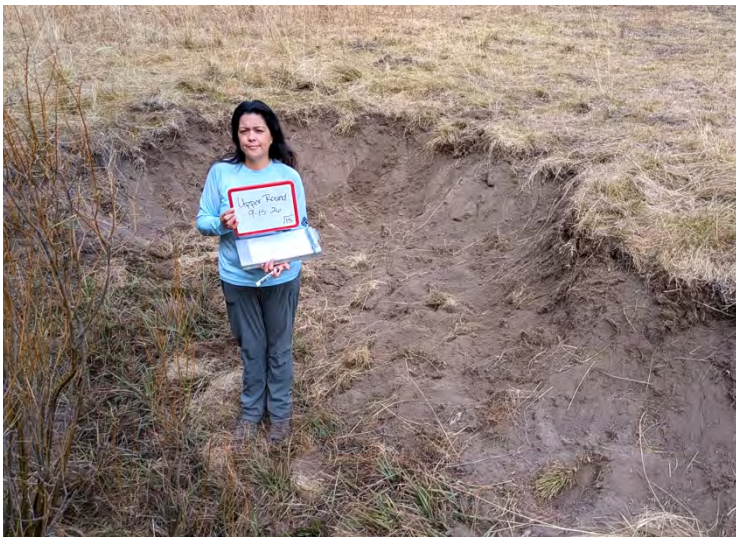
Native seed collection with USFS

Fieldwork and watchdog monitoring help identify threats and violations

Our CSERC staff has already spent countless days this year in the forest. We've visited thinning logging projects where we've found treatments that mostly comply with the requirements to minimize resource impacts. We've found meadows overgrazed by livestock and repeated instances of livestock trespassing into "off limits" areas. We've also monitored hazard tree logging projects where big, healthy trees were cut that should not have been logged.



The lack of livestock management continues to be a major environmental concern



This field season, CSERC staff is monitoring more than 60 meadows in the Stanislaus Forest. The most common and destructive damage we find is the trampling and pocking of special aquatic resources like streams and fens. Not only does the water quality suffer for wildlife and other downstream users, but the chiseling of steam banks causes erosion and deepens channels that dry up meadows over time.

Another widespread problem is overgrazing. Cattle are allowed to consume 40% of the meadow grasses, but left unmanaged, cattle often graze down to bare dirt in many meadows.

One of the positive results of all of CSERC's fieldwork and watchdog monitoring is that the Forest Service and the many stakeholders in the two forest stakeholder groups recognize how knowledgeable our staff is about where resource issues exist, or where livestock management is inadequate, or where the local forest's dirt and gravel roads are severely eroded or blown out. Combined with our year-round wildlife surveys, our watchdog monitoring gives us high credibility that even the Forest Service acknowledges.



Update on large landscape forest treatment plans that affect vast areas



Over this summer and early fall, widespread logging treatments (such as shown above) across two large project areas (SERAL and SERAL 2.0) have treated thousands of acres of the local national forest. Thick, dense forest stands were thinned of trees (retaining the larger trees), and most of the surface and ladder fuels were removed in order to reduce the risk of extreme wildfires burning destructively across the treated areas.

A key reason for all the work getting implemented is the successful collaboration by forest stakeholders in both the Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS) group and the Amador Calaveras Consensus Group (ACCG). Over many years of difficult negotiations by representatives of the timber industry, conservation groups, county government, businesses, recreation interests, the Forest Service, and water agencies, both ACCG and YSS managed to come to consensus support for “large landscape” forest projects. Those projects gained Forest Service approval to do thinning logging, mastication of brush fields, and the creation of linear fuel breaks that can provide firefighters with safer locations to work when attempting to suppress high-severity fires.

The largest of the forest treatment projects approved by the Forest Service is the giant **MAC Project** – half on the Eldorado National Forest and half on the northern district of the Stanislaus Forest. Vast portions of the 250,000-acre planning area are now authorized for treatments. The challenge is to find funding and then for stakeholders and the Forest Service to agree on which treatments to do first.



Given recent anti-environmental actions by the Administration, CSERC fears there may no longer be Forest Service support to allow stakeholder groups to focus only on project actions that gain broad consensus.

Because ramping up wood production is now the agency's top priority, that may undermine collaborative efforts that until now have ensured that no stakeholders were major losers when projects were jointly developed. Where the agency once promoted consensus agreement as “the path forward,” now timber industry interests and resource outputs may dominate upcoming plans.

Widely distributed, but seldom seen – the fascinating weasel

Weasels belong to the same family as river otters, wolverines, mink, and badgers. In the Sierra Nevada, both the long-tailed weasel and short-tailed weasel are widely distributed, but neither are often seen by people. Although they are mostly nocturnal, they can often be out in daytime if hunger is a motivator. Studies assert that a weasel eats 40% or more of its body weight each day, so they may kill more mice, voles, chipmunks, rabbits, or other small animals than they can consume to cache their kills for subsequent days.



The short-tailed weasel has caught the attention of our CSERC staff in recent months due to numerous weasels being detected at our cameras. We've gone many years in between getting pictures of weasels, so it's been a surprise to get recent detections at cameras miles apart.

The short-tailed weasel is also called "ermine." Like the long-tailed weasel, the short-tailed is long and slender, enabling it to pursue prey into holes or small openings. But what makes it notable is that in winter, in snowy areas the ermine's coat changes to white – giving it perfect camouflage except for a black tail tip.

One of our staff has had the chance to view short-tailed as well as long-tailed weasels over many years of fieldwork and backpacking. He emphasizes how energetic and speedy weasels are. They bound or scamper when moving, and they can make sudden leaps two or three times their length. "Hyper-active" is a good term.

All pictures on this page show short-tailed weasels. The two lower photos are courtesy of the National Park Service. One Park Service site describes weasels doing a "crazy war dance" at times when they approach prey – hopping and twisting wildly about to disorient the prey until it's finally leapt upon by the weasel.



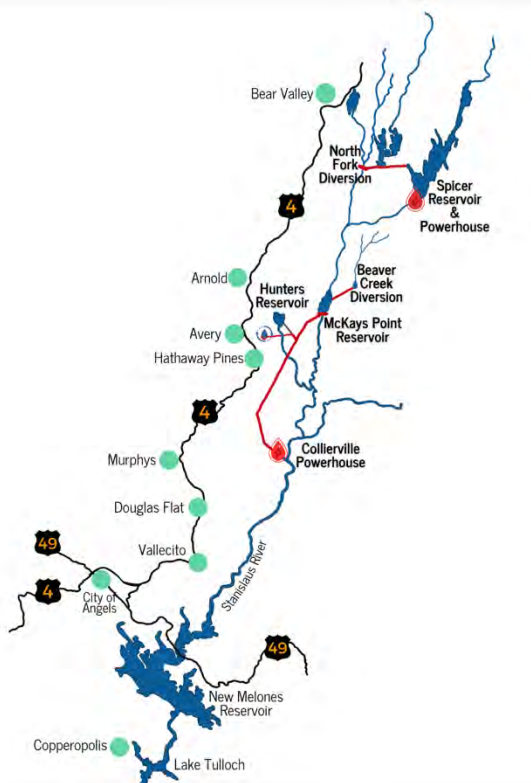
Water issues are often highly contentious, and outcomes can shape river management for decades into the future

One of the most complicated (and technical) issues that CSERC deals with is **Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) hydroelectric project “relicensing,”** a years-long planning process that establishes legal mandates for river flows and recreation that will be in place for 40 years or more.

Last year CSERC wrapped up six years of participation in the **Phoenix FERC relicensing project**, which dealt with Lyons Reservoir and how to manage the South Fork Stanislaus River between Lyons Reservoir and New Melones Reservoir downstream.



This year, amidst a wide range of other water issues and river plans, CSERC is engaging in the FERC relicensing for the North Fork Stanislaus River. Over multiple years of stakeholder meetings, that process will lead to alternatives for managing Spicer Reservoir, Highland Creek, and the North Fork Stanislaus River, which flows down to McKays Reservoir and on to the Collierville Powerhouse above New Melones Reservoir. **The photo above shows the North Fork diversion dam.** The overall FERC relicensing project is being facilitated by the Calaveras County Water District (CCWD) in collaboration with the Northern California Power Agency (NCPA), which operates adjacent, connected portions of the overall water system of reservoirs, tunnels, and powerhouses.



In contrast to the relatively new planning process for the North Fork Stanislaus River, **the FERC relicensing process for the Lower Tuolumne River (Don Pedro and LaGrange licenses)** has been drawn out over nearly a decade of planning. In that highly contentious process, water districts that supply water to major agricultural customers chose not to negotiate potential middle ground measures to resolve issues related to water quality and the decimated populations of salmon struggling to persist in the river.

In that Lower Tuolumne River FERC planning process, CSERC and a coalition of conservation and fish advocacy organizations are still pressing the State Water Board to take a strong stand to restore salmon and steelhead populations. For the North Fork Stanislaus process, studies are underway to show where issues may need stakeholders' consideration.

CSERC watches over a vast region to vigilantly work to defend nature



In pre-school and kindergarten, we are supposed to learn how to get along, respect others, and to share. But humans as a whole are failing miserably at getting along with each other or sharing equitably. Wars, widespread hunger in many parts of the world, and polarization prevail.

Humans are also failing miserably do get along with the incredibly diverse species that co-exist with us on this precious planet. Even in the local region where public lands have been formally designated for various degrees of resource protection, our society still often fixates on economics, profits, and maximum use.

Like the vigilant hawk at left, CSERC strives to be on the lookout, watching over the region in order to effectively identify threats and to quickly respond. Even as we undertake that advocacy work on behalf of the environment, we still attempt to model basic lessons learned – to show respect for others while striving to find win-win outcomes (sharing).

Due to all the threats that currently pose risk to nature across the vast Northern Yosemite region, our Center has ramped up our already high level of work this year to attempt to meet the challenges. To do that work, however, and to be able to apply staff time to our core mission rather than doing fundraising, we need vital funding support from our members. **If our work matters to you, please donate and partner with us.**



"Here is my tax-deductible donation towards CSERC's many efforts."

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Which brilliant fall colors will really stand out this season?



Each year colorful displays of fall foliage begin first at the highest elevations – with aspens turning bright yellow or red. Soon the maples, cottonwoods, and oaks across the main belt of forest turn golden or assorted other hues.

Often the mixed conifer forests get the most fall color attention because more people live or visit at the lower elevations. Dogwoods can be bright red or pink, alongside intensely yellow maple leaves or the various colors of black oaks. Many factors from weather patterns to temperatures can dampen the brilliance of fall colors in an area, or they can enhance colors with a special intensity.

Which trees will be most impressive this year?

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