

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.



From top to bottom, the forest's transition to fall colors has begun

At the crest zone of the mountain range, fall colors have begun to paint the landscape with hues of yellow, orange, red, and gold. The groundcover of wild blueberries at right provides a stunning contrast with the green trees and bushes.

Aspens at the high elevations are among the first trees to transition to fall colors. While the east side of the Sierra Nevada wins easily for providing broad panoramic displays, aspens at Eagle Meadow, Bell Meadow, and along Highway 4 and Highway 88 are also eye-catching with their brilliance.

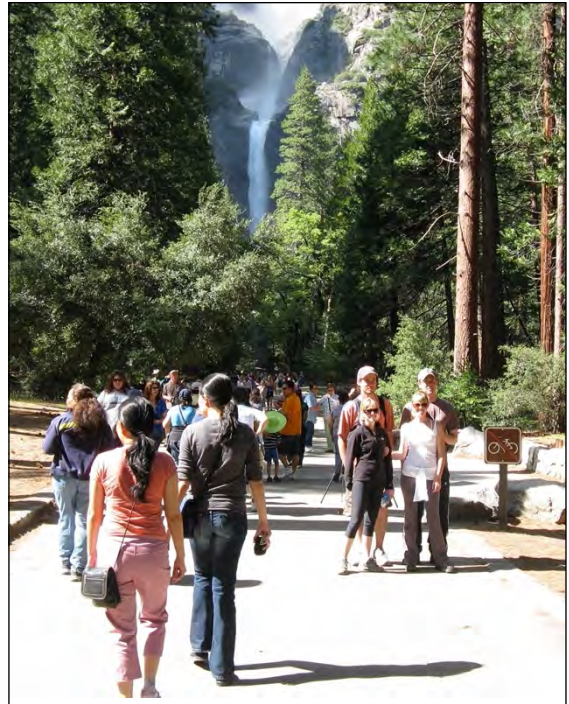


Every fall season is different, and timing matters for seeing leaf colors at their peak. The fun of seeking out fall displays can be an adventure all by itself. Combining that search with a goal to also look for elusive wildlife can double the reward. Over many weeks, seasonal colors slowly move down in elevation, so you have many chances to find prime viewing.

The planning process for managing vehicles and visitors in Yosemite Park shifts from public comments to the crafting of a final decision

For CSERC and all of you who are our members, **how Yosemite National Park is managed is a pivotally important matter.** Our staff has invested countless hours into monitoring visitor use levels, traffic conditions, and the degree of crowding during the long tourism season. We've met with Park officials, written op-eds for newspapers, and facilitated advocacy efforts by local and national conservation groups.

Despite decades of Park superintendents openly acknowledging the problem of too many vehicles and times of too much congestion, politicians have blocked all past proposals to resolve the traffic jams and crowding. Year after year in the "gateway" counties that surround Yosemite Park, more resort lodges, new restaurants, and new retail businesses have sprouted up to take advantage of profits from visitors to Yosemite.



The COVID outbreak forced the Park Service to take action to reduce crowding, which led to numerous years of tests of various day-use reservation systems to manage the number of vehicles entering the Park. Many visitors applauded fewer vehicles and the reduction in congestion, but those representing businesses have consistently lobbied against reservations and any limits on how many vehicles are allowed into the Park.

Over the past two years, the Park Service has gone to great lengths to engage the interested public in discussing options for a Visitor Access Management Plan. In response to businesses, the Park put forward one alternative to allow unlimited vehicles and visitors as well as a second alternative to only require reservations for Yosemite Valley.

But because the Park identified a modified version of this year's day-use reservation system as the "preferred alternative," local region businesses and politicians railed against the Park Service with misinformed claims and strident opposition.

CSERC staff testified before the Tuolumne County Supervisors to support the need for the Park Service to adopt a plan that will protect Yosemite resources and reduce congestion. The supervisors still voted in opposition. The last public comment period has ended. Now we await the Park's final decision, which could come by the end of the year.

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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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Latest update about the proposed nation-wide Old Growth policy

Large ancient trees can often motivate us to pause in awe and to consider how many centuries such trees have managed to persevere. Old trees have survived wildfires, exceptional wind events, times of drought, and insect outbreaks. Giant “old growth” trees reflect by their size the vast amount of time it has taken them to grow so large. As part of an ecosystem, ancient trees can be uniquely valuable for many wildlife species. They can also be inspirational for those who love forests and wild nature.



In April 2022, the Biden Administration adopted an executive order directing federal forest managers to devise strategies to protect and sustain old growth forests. The ensuing lengthy planning process has engaged unprecedented numbers of concerned citizens and special interests; but no clear plan for protecting large, old trees has yet been presented.

It was not a surprise that an extensive science review found that extreme wildfires, severe droughts, and insect outbreaks pose the main threats to old growth forests. But as our staff pointed out in our comments, **the U.S. Forest Service doesn't control fires, droughts, or insect outbreaks. What it does control is whether to allow the cutting of large, old trees** – and whether to allow new roads and forest alteration to intrude into areas that still contain old growth conditions.

This year the Old Growth policy planning process asked for public input on whether commercial logging treatments should be a priority in “managing forests” to preserve old growth conditions. CSERC accepts that in some “already roaded, already disturbed” areas, the thinning of small and mid-size trees may reduce dense forest conditions and provide essential spacing for large, old trees. But there are many ecological reasons for keeping bulldozers, chainsaws, and machinery out of roadless, still-pristine old growth areas.

In CSERC's final comments for the national Old Growth plan, we emphasized the need for a national forest policy that prohibits the cutting of large, old trees except in situations of hazardous risk and public safety. We provided detailed specifics about how to make such a strategy workable and enforceable.

Now we wait to see if the Forest Service will add substance to a weak policy with good intentions. **The tree-huggers amongst us care about old growth trees!**



CSERC volunteers truly ROCKED this field season, making a positive and lasting impact in our local forest and in Yosemite



MORE THAN 50 VOLUNTEERS DONATED NEARLY 450 HOURS COMPLETING IMPORTANT AND MEANINGFUL RESTORATION WORK.

CSERC volunteers generously gave their time, energy, and some sweat to help complete an array of restoration and rehabilitation projects this year. Partnering twice with Yosemite National Park at Ackerson Meadow, CSERC volunteers participated in that ongoing \$30 million dollar restoration project by planting native vegetation and collecting seeds for future revegetation work.



Thank you to all our volunteers! Your positive energy and eagerness to help made the workdays so much fun and so successful!



In one project, CSERC partnered with the Forest Service to rehabilitate the Trail of the Ancient Dwarfs, an interpretive trail that had been neglected for decades and had fallen into serious disrepair.

CSERC volunteers helped clear brush and obstacles from the trail, removed the few remaining signposts, installed new signposts, and created rock-lined pathways to guide trail visitors to the next signpost along the interpretive trail.



IF YOU DIDN'T VOLUNTEER THIS YEAR, PLEASE CONSIDER SIGNING UP AT OUR WEBSITE TO BE NOTIFIED IN THE FUTURE ABOUT NEW VOLUNTEER WORKDAY OPPORTUNITIES.

CSERC also coordinated six other volunteer workdays to protect meadows. Work included weed and brush removal and repairs to fencing to prevent livestock from trespassing into the meadows. Damage from livestock (overgrazing, pocking, trampling, and chiseling) is by far the main threat to meadows of the region.

Work at Quail Meadow was the result of a generous grant from the Schwemm Family Foundation. Their grant funded the purchase of needed supplies and equipment and a portion of CSERC staff time. Funding is often needed to make these types of projects possible. Thanks to generous funders like the Schwemm Family Foundation, CSERC can focus on organizing and completing the needed work with our dedicated volunteers.



Livestock overgrazing and trampling in Stanislaus Forest meadows pose threats to water quality and fragile ecosystems

CSERC staff regularly monitors dozens of the meadows in the Stanislaus National Forest where cattle are permitted to graze. We capture images at established photo points, measure forage heights at Forest Service approved transects, and survey for damage to streambanks, springs, ponds, fens, and other fragile landscape features – before, during, and at the end of the grazing season.

Unlike grasslands which are drier, meadows are classified as wetlands due to their seasonal inundation, saturated soils, and specially adapted plant species. When they are healthy, wet meadows add significantly to biodiversity by providing habitat for many species that depend on them for at least part of their life cycle.



Taken just days apart, these photos show a stark comparison between an overgrazed and an ungrazed meadow.

Overgrazing by cattle, trampling of riparian vegetation, and streambank chiseling can lead to severe erosion, impaired water quality, and habitat degradation – especially in wet meadows. When the protective layer of vegetation is stripped away, the soil is exposed to the effects of wind and water. The erosion can result in sediment washing into nearby streams and rivers, negatively affecting water quality and often harming aquatic life.

Additionally, overgrazing can disrupt the delicate balance of plant species, favoring non-native invasives that outcompete native flora. Loss of vegetation cover makes meadows less valuable for sensitive amphibian species, insects, small mammals, and songbirds. It also reduces prey species available for raptors and carnivorous mammals, such as coyotes, foxes, and bobcats. This loss of biodiversity not only diminishes the aesthetic value of the meadows, it also has detrimental effects on ecosystem stability and reduces the ability for degraded meadows to store and filter water.

CSERC is committed to our meadow monitoring program. We continue to be a leading source of information to the Forest Service – providing valuable data and photo evidence to the range management staff who often lack sufficient resources or the capacity to adequately monitor themselves. We also work to motivate the Forest staff to hold livestock permittees accountable for clear violations.

Forest Service decision for SERAL 2.0 project approves a huge amount of forest treatments, but two parts of the project remain undecided

Recent Stanislaus Forest decisions have cumulatively approved forest treatments that may affect hundreds of square miles of national forest land across our region. Such complicated agency decisions may seem dry and technical, but what they authorize for treatments can often make a major difference in the forest for wildlife, water quality, scenic values, and recreation.

SERAL 2.0

This summer, Stanislaus Forest supervisor Jason Kuiken approved the SERAL 2.0 project - which covers a vast area south of Highway 108 extending from the edge of the foothills to areas east of Pinecrest. It also includes a block of national forest located on the north side of the Middle Fork Stanislaus River.

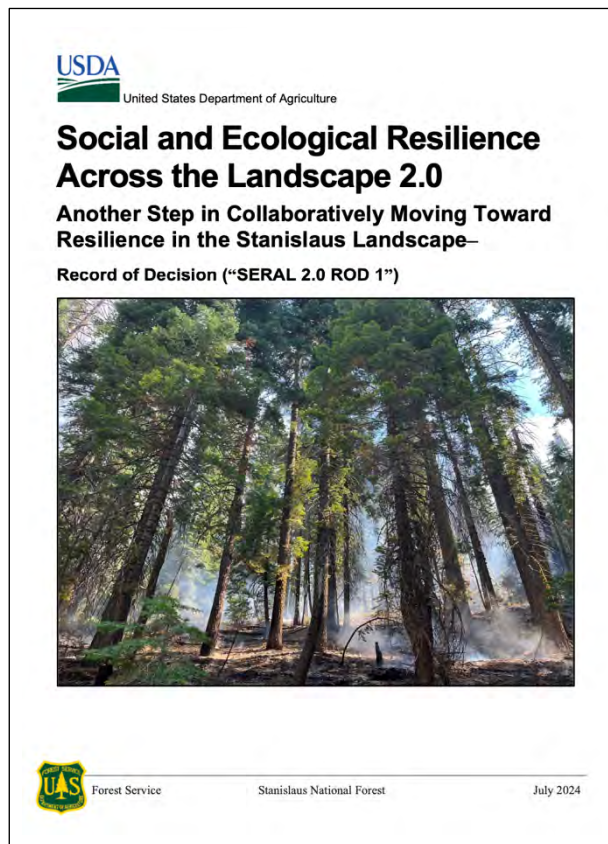
That decision authorized 24,456 acres of thinning logging, 13,682 acres of fuel breaks to be constructed, 19,491 acres of mechanical fuels treatments separate from the thinning logging, and a significant amount of road reconstruction, road maintenance, and new temporary road construction. Numbers are hard to comprehend, but what matters is that SERAL 2.0 is a huge project that allows up to 10 years of forest treatments.

What the decision did NOT decide was whether to approve plans to apply herbicides on up to 7,000 acres of fuel breaks as a controversial treatment to control vegetation. Local conservation groups objected to that proposal when they commented on the project.

The SERAL 2.0 decision also did not decide whether to pre-approve “condition-based” logging and road construction for possible future fire or drought events. **Approving logging now for speculative future events is a controversial approach that has resulted in legal challenges to projects elsewhere.** A decision on those two portions of the SERAL 2.0 project was postponed to a future decision, perhaps later this fall.

THE SEPARATE PLAN FOR HAZARD TREE LOGGING

In September, a different decision by the Forest Supervisor authorized the logging of trees judged to be hazards to infrastructure or to public safety. While CSERC has never objected to the cutting of trees that pose true risk to people or to facilities, the original Hazard Tree Plan was controversial because it allowed for widespread removal of large green “defect” trees - including those that might be growing far back from roads and that couldn’t pose legitimate risk to public safety. Further, along remote roads with little use and low risk, the Plan allowed the cutting of big green “hazard” trees that normally are off limits to logging. The final Plan was revised to reduce controversy, but it is still less than ideal from CSERC’s perspective. We agree, however, that it is more reasonable and less likely to be mis-used to take debatable trees that don’t pose hazardous risk. Overall, the new Plan allows hazard trees to be marked and then logged along all roads in the local forest.



No, it's not a burger. The MAC Project is the biggest local forest treatment project ever proposed, and your input is requested

In the past, a “huge” forest project to do logging, fuel breaks, and other treatments might be planned for a few thousand acres. **The latest USFS “large landscape” plan (called the MAC Project) envisions 85,000 acres of forest treatments within a planning area of roughly a QUARTER MILLION acres of national forest.** “Large” is clearly an understatement.

Years ago, CSERC helped form the **Amador Calaveras Consensus Group (ACCG)** to bring together forest stakeholders to work toward common goals for the local forest. A lot has been achieved.

Now ACCG and the Forest Service are partnering with the **Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority (UMRWA)** - made up of water agencies and counties. The collective goal is to reduce wildfire risk to communities, boost local economies, and restore the ecosystem. A recent ACCG fieldtrip (*see photos*) was held at sites within the MAC Project area (which straddles both the Eldorado and Stanislaus Forests).



Collaboration is not always easy or successful. With so many diverse interests attempting to design a consensus-based plan for the MAC Project area, there are understandably different points of view on issues.

Should herbicides be used for managing fuel breaks? What size limit is appropriate to protect large trees in areas selected for thinning logging? How wide should fuel breaks be to make them effective for anchoring fire suppression efforts or broadcast burns, without creating excessively wide gaps in the forest that may block movement by some wildlife species?



The Forest Service has set a deadline of October 28th for the public to submit scoping comments for the MAC Project. “Scoping” allows you to share input with the USFS and spell out any reasons why you support or oppose the proposed forest treatments that are identified in the Scoping Notice.

To comment, go to the Eldorado National Forest website; and under “Projects” look for “MAC Forest Project.” In months to come, a draft EIS will be made available to allow for more public input as the USFS, UMRWA, and ACCG collectively attempt to craft a final plan that they hope will have broad support.

It's a plan that's already generated love, hate, outcries, and indifference – Will new environmental analysis lead to broader support or litigation?

Years back, a coalition of politically conservative rural California counties created a non-profit corporation named **Golden State Natural Resources (GSNR)** to attempt to find economic solutions for “too much biomass” (waste wood) in forest regions. In 2022, GSNR announced the start of an environmental review process for a mammoth biomass project.

That GSNR plan is to construct two large processing facilities that would produce massive amounts of wood pellets to send by train to the Port of Stockton. The pellets would then be shipped overseas and burned as fuel in Europe or Japan. One facility would be built in Lassen County, and one would be constructed in Tuolumne County.



GSNR has already filed applications with local county governments seeking approval for portions of the project that need certain permits. The overall project, however, is still inching through the state-required CEQA planning process. The draft EIR for the project is being released this month for public review.

AVID SUPPORTERS, PASSIONATE CRITICS

Rural politicians and those tied to the timber industry have enthusiastically promoted the GSNR project based on the promise of increased jobs, other economic reasons, and benefits for associated logging projects.



On the other side, some conservation groups have vehemently opposed the project (including threatening litigation) on grounds that it would pollute by “burning wood” as fuel wherever the pellets end up. CSERC has repeatedly pointed out that most of the biomass (waste wood) will otherwise be burned in piles out in the forest. The wood will be burned either way, but it will at least be “fuel” as wood pellets.

Project advocates claim that the wood pellets would replace the burning of coal, which would certainly be positive. However, CSERC has pointed critically to the massive GHG emissions that would be created by transporting the enormous quantities of waste wood to processing facilities, and then by rail, and then by ship to the eventual destination.

Until our staff analyzes the DEIR to see which measures are proposed to mitigate for the GHG emissions, we’ll withhold judgment.

Both graphics are from the GSNR website.

What is that “skinny chicken” bird? ...and why haven’t we spotted those birds out in the forest?

In the past these chickenlike birds were classified as “blue grouse,” but more recently they’ve been designated “sooty grouse.” Across the Sierra Nevada region, they inhabit open forests with grasses and shrubs, ranging from habitat in the middle elevations all the way up near tree line.

About the size of a crow, females (like the one at right) are mottled brown with small heads and dark tails. Males (at bottom) can be a darker gray charcoal color, which may be what earned these birds the label “sooty grouse.”

When CSERC staff has infrequently come across these birds in the forest, the grouse may act somewhat indifferent to our presence -- as long as we keep our distance. In contrast, if a hiker is not aware of a grouse sheltering silently in a bush or at the base of a small tree along his route, the grouse’s sudden “escape” flight up into the air at the last moment can create a heart-thumping reaction from the startled hiker.

During the spring and summer, a female grouse and her young may feed on insects such as ants, beetles, and grasshoppers, but they also consume leaves, flowers, and berries. In the winter, grouse feed mostly on the needles of conifers, especially when snow covers much of the forest’s low-growing groundcovers and bushes.



Photo: Audubon – A. Schmeirer



Photo: Pierce Barrett – Audubon photography awards

Our staff has occasionally seen grouse in the forest east of Pinecrest, up in the Sonora Pass, or in the forest of Yosemite Park. But so far none of our staff has seen a male during breeding season when they may attempt to impress females by strutting around, fanning their tail, and doing a courtship display of their bright-colored yellow to reddish neck feathers (such as shown at left).

Given their tolerance when approached quietly, it is somewhat surprising that they manage to avoid predators sufficiently to maintain their population in the region. Seeing a solitary grouse or a female with young can provide a glimpse of a bird species that doesn’t get a lot of attention.

It takes two to make a meaningful partnership



Photo: Phil Schermeister

A key purpose of our newsletter is to raise awareness about current conservation issues that affect precious wild places, wildlife, or how much water gets left in a river. When you and others read articles and learn about timely issues, that can increase advocacy for outcomes that benefit nature across the vast Northern Yosemite region.

You may not know that our small, dedicated staff donates countless hours each year on top of our regular workload as one way we can stretch member donations. Whether it's reading a detailed planning document, setting up cameras in a remote forest location, or testifying at a key hearing – our staff serves day after day on the “frontlines” to defend nature across the region.

Your donation, combined with others, provides funding that enables us to do pivotal work. **At whatever amount you feel is right for you, please partner with us by donating.**

“Here is my tax-deductible donation towards CSERC’s many efforts.”

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Prolific amounts of cones and acorns are falling this fall



The abundance of acorns and cones this year is exceptional. Unusually large acorns often sound like rocks hitting as they fall onto decks, cars, and roofs. Squirrels are harvesting Ponderosa pine and sugar pine cones with a fervor that often results in a steady cascade of cones plummeting onto the forest floor below. Countless piles of chewed cones are left after squirrels remove the nutritious seeds.

In many ways, we, too, have opportunities to distribute beneficial seeds – seeds of awareness about nature. We can plant them with our children, grandkids, relatives, or friends. By making others aware of why we care about water, wildlife, forests, and wild places – we can call attention to the natural world that so many take for granted.

Fall is a season that is often seen as a time to give thanks. Our region provides many reasons to do so.

