



Grateful to be able to make a difference, amidst all the challenges...

In the 35 years that CSERC has served as a voice for wild places, water, and wildlife across our vast region, there have never been as many national level attacks on environmental policies or so many staffing positions lost at agencies responsible for federal lands.

Protection for wild places that is based upon the Roadless Rule is threatened – potentially affecting 43 million acres of pristine areas. Key parts of the Endangered Species Act are being targeted. Economics could now determine whether some species are allowed to go extinct.

Instead of managing National Parks to protect resources for future generations, the Park Service now aims to maximize visitor numbers and profits for gateway businesses. Across Forest Service and BLM lands, timber production is the highest priority. Downsizing of agency staffs remains a threat. There are many national policy shifts that favor oil, gas, or mining and slash protections for water, air quality, and wildlife.



But despite all the national level threats, in our local region CSERC has built long-standing relationships with a diversity of forest and watershed stakeholders – connections that often still lead to ecologically positive collaborative agreements. CSERC's years of striving for win-win outcomes is a timely strategy in dire times.



Our Center also has the most experienced and effective staff in all our years of advocacy.

Chelsea has been outstanding in organizing restoration workdays and responding to land planning and development. Heather provides translation for our Spanish version of the CSERC website and assists with membership.

Stan and Tom have led highly effective wildlife photo-detection surveys, meadow monitoring, and water advocacy. And John adds experience, intimate knowledge of the region, and connections to the media. We're grateful to often be able to make a strategic difference for precious places and resources at the local level.

National Parks like Yosemite continue to be in the news as politics affect staffing, management, entrance fees, and images on Park passes

Few topics in the media get as much attention as National Parks, and Yosemite is among the most featured. Under the new Administration, there was a lengthy period when Park Service employees were pressured to take early retirement or face potential loss of their jobs as downsizing of the agency took place.

Outcry from National Park advocates led to most Park Service employees keeping their jobs. A shortened Day-Use Reservation system was put into place for Yosemite, but the number of daily reservations was raised so high that congested parking areas and crowding still dominated much of the summer season.

Last spring Ray McPadden was appointed acting superintendent at Yosemite Park, and in November he became the official superintendent – due in part to vocal support from local Congressman Tom McClintock. The Congressman has often attacked Day-Use Reservations or any Yosemite Park policy that limits vehicles and visitors to reduce traffic jams, crowding, and congestion.



The Department of the Interior in November unveiled the new “America the Beautiful” pass for Parks and other federally managed areas. Instead of bighorn sheep or scenic landscapes, the pass features the image of President Trump next to George Washington. In another controversial action, the Administration revealed that starting January 1st, **foreign visitors will face a surcharge of an extra \$100 per visitor** to visit 11 National Parks (including Yosemite) in addition to the standard entry fee.

Due to the impacts to Park staffing along with shifting Park policies, **CSERC significantly ramped up our watchdog monitoring in Yosemite this year** – both before and during the federal shutdown.

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***CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization
working to protect the water, wildlife, and wild
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Major changes at the Forest Service ripple across the system

For decades, upper level Forest Service managers have worked out of the Region 5 office in Vallejo - overseeing fire management, timber, recreation, and other multiple-use programs for 18 national forests in California and Hawaii.

To get a sense of how vast Region 5 is, consider that it includes affiliated Pacific Islands, national forest lands that stretch to the Mexican border, iconic recreational lands at Big Sur along the coast, and national forests covering the Sierra Nevada and much of Northern California.

Now the Administration has eliminated most of the agency's Region 5 natural resource positions, and **the role of administering Region 5 has been transferred to the Region 6 office in Portland, Oregon.** Region 6 already oversees all of the national forests in Oregon and Washington. Under the new plan, Regional Forester Jacque Buchanan of Region 6 will now not only manage a combined Region 5 and Region 6, she'll also oversee Alaska's millions of acres of national forest lands.



For environmental organizations and activists who've spent years meeting in person with agency officials of the local Region to build solid relationships, having Region-level leadership in far distant Portland creates a major challenge. The consolidation of Regional USFS offices adds to CSERC's concerns over the Administration's elimination of many agency positions that don't directly benefit timber production.

CSERC engages locally with USFS staff in two forest stakeholder groups and in our Center's many efforts that benefit the Stanislaus Forest. In response to the Forest Service having less staff capacity and less of a focus on water, wildlife, and wild places, this year we ramped up our forest watchdog monitoring, increased our photo-detection surveys for rare wildlife species, and increased our restoration workdays on USFS lands.



We've learned that the number of local Forest Service staff over the year ahead will be considerably lower than the "normal" level of staffing that the Forest had two years ago. It's been made clear to those who remain that increasing wood production is the agency's top priority. Wildlife, recreation, water, wilderness, and other multiple-use USFS programs are likely to face diminished staff capacity and limited budgets in the year ahead.

During these challenging times, CSERC's year-round fieldwork and our staff's well-informed advocacy at key forest meetings have never been more needed.

Outcomes of flow management plans will affect rivers for decades

One of the most significant environmental issues affecting water across our vast region is the debate over how much water needs to stay in rivers as a minimum flow.

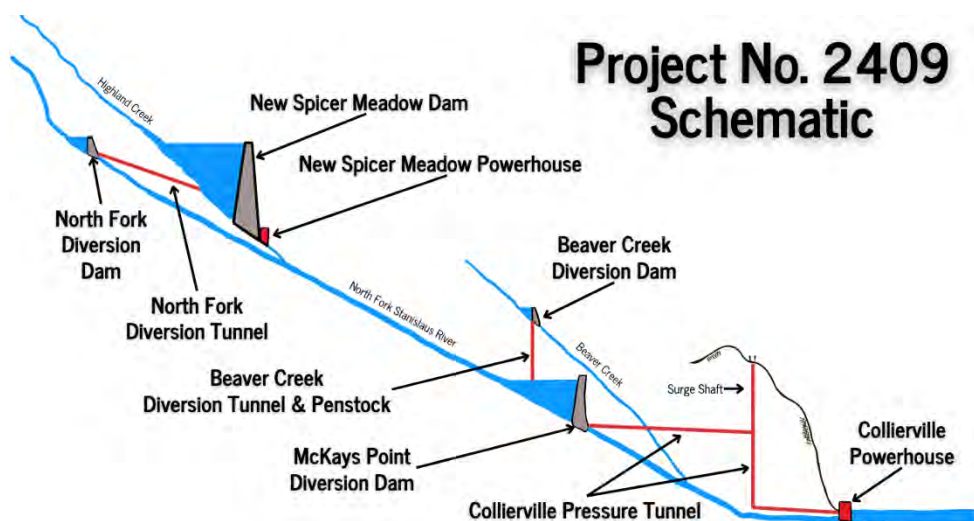
As an example, the Lower Tuolumne River at right (seen under high-flow conditions during a wet weather year) often has 80% of the river's natural "unimpaired" flows diverted for agriculture and other uses. That leaves just 20% in the river as the minimum flow – a key reason why the river's salmon and steelhead populations have fallen to a small percentage of their historic numbers.



For decades CSERC has participated in complex planning processes by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which has authority to mandate how rivers must be managed under hydroelectric licenses. Each FERC plan can take years to complete, with countless meetings, field sessions, and hearings.

The newest FERC planning process in the region was launched in October by CCWD (the Calaveras County Water District) for the North Fork Stanislaus River. That FERC Plan will focus on New Spicer Reservoir and the Collierville Powerhouse near New Melones Reservoir. (*See the schematic below.*)

CSERC is highly familiar with a number of the consultants and planning specialists who are partnering with CCWD to help develop the new river management plan. Our hope is to find middle-ground river management measures that will justify the FERC approving a new hydroelectric license for up to 50 years.



Water districts promote “Voluntary Agreements” to avoid having to comply with the State Water Board’s science-based flow plan



Tuolumne River - Photo credit CA.News

While the FERC is the federal agency with the highest authority for managing rivers with hydro projects on federal lands, the State Water Board has legal authority in the state for water quality and recreation. With conservation so highly supported in California, you would think that the Water Board would take actions that would benefit aquatic species such as salmon and steelhead by requiring high flows and cool water in rivers to improve water quality.

That’s not the case. Agriculture and water purveyors not only dominate FERC planning processes, their lobbyists and supportive local politicians dominate the Water Board’s planning processes as well.

For over a decade CSERC, river organizations, fish advocates, and other groups have jointly urged the State Water Board to require more flows to remain in rivers such as the Tuolumne, Merced, and Stanislaus Rivers. Salmon numbers in those rivers are far below sustainable levels, and in some years, fish returning from the ocean to spawn only make up a tiny percent of fish numbers from 50 years ago. **Recognizing the need, in 2018 the Water Board approved a science-based Bay-Delta Update Plan that required water districts to leave 30-40% of unimpaired (natural) flows in rivers.** Water Board members agreed that significantly increasing river flows was critical to keep salmon from going extinct in rivers like the Tuolumne River.

But seven years later, the Water Board has still not implemented its river flow decision. Instead, due to lawsuits and political lobbying by agricultural interests and water diverters, the Water Board has delayed taking action in order to allow water districts to propose a “Voluntary Agreement” (VA). The VA would let the district continue to take the vast majority of water out of the river in return for spending lots of money to dump huge amounts of gravel into the river to supposedly benefit salmon. But biologists strongly assert that it’s cold, high flows in the river that are needed, with gravel being only a minor factor.

Last month two of CSERC’s staff testified at a day-long Water Board hearing. We again urged the Board to follow the science and to stop allowing big agriculture and water districts to continue to delay the Water Board’s past decision to require adequate flows in the Tuolumne River. As expected, under pressure from the water diverters, the Water Board put off any decision until sometime next year. CSERC will keep pressing for higher flows.



Photo credit Animals A-Z.com

CSERC's field season stretches year-round in the local Forest

Every year, in coordination with Forest Service staff, CSERC conducts wildlife surveys throughout the Stanislaus National Forest. We set up motion-sensitive cameras that photograph any animals that come within range – whether it's a bear, gray fox, mountain lion, or something very rare. This extensive effort provides critical, current data about wildlife species of concern and their habitat use.

We use a variety of pungent lures and baits to attract wildlife to the camera stations. The goal is to get photo evidence of rare species such as fisher, marten, wolverine, or Sierra Nevada red fox. Detections of any of these target species can then be used to inform Forest Service management decisions.



CSERC often has a dozen or more camera stations in operation that we maintain regularly. The cameras are almost always located in remote, rugged, and difficult-to-access terrain, making getting to them an adventure in itself.

Retrieving the camera flashcards and analyzing thousands of images is a time-consuming, but essential process. Recently we've been rewarded with detections of fishers, martens, bear cubs, coyote pups, spotted skunks, and other seldom seen wildlife. This is the first year we detected short-tailed weasels including the one shown at right.



Our fieldwork includes meadow surveys and watchdog monitoring



This fen at Bear Tree Meadow was pocked, trampled, and overgrazed by cattle – all violations of the federal grazing permit.

CSERC regularly monitors 62 meadows on 14 different cattle grazing allotments within the Stanislaus Forest. We report to the Forest Service our observations of resource conditions and any violations of permit agreements. Our surveys allow us to keep a close eye on local mountain meadows, one of the most fragile and sensitive habitat types in our region. Meadows are subject to damage by livestock grazing, by encroachment from conifers, and from illegal off-highway vehicle use.

We frequently report the overgrazing of meadow vegetation (when livestock leaves less than a 4-inch stubble height of key meadow grasses or when livestock consume more than 40% of forage). We also report any livestock trespass into areas that are legally closed to cattle grazing (such as Bourland Meadow). Our extensive fieldwork also can reveal livestock damage to fragile streambanks and fens. While it often seems that our complaints to the Forest Service fall on deaf ears – with weak excuses made by the Forest staff on behalf of the permittees – our consistent collection of meadow data provides evidence for why better livestock management is needed to protect national forest meadows and riparian habitat along forest streams.

In contrast to degraded areas, the photo at right shows healthy late-season meadow conditions at Bloomer Lake after a much-needed year of rest from cattle grazing.



How close are wolves to our local region, and how are they faring elsewhere in the state?



Photo courtesy Eva Blue – Unsplash

Amidst CSERC's efforts to locate rare furbearers such as the Pacific fisher, marten, and Sierra Nevada red fox, our staff also placed motion-triggered cameras in the national forest this year where they might get photos of wolves. No wolves were detected, but the more we learn about wolves in the state, the more we expect that wolves will likely be found sometime soon in our local region if they are not already residing here.

Since wolves recolonized California from Oregon in 2011, the California State Department of Fish and Wildlife has given them special attention. When one marauding wolf pack called the Beyem Seyo pack repeatedly killed livestock this year, CDFW biologists worked to protect livestock and to mitigate wolf conflict. Federal biologists joined in, using drones to haze the wolves when they threatened livestock. Despite the non-lethal efforts, the Beyem Seyo pack persisted in livestock depredation. Because the pack was deemed to be responsible for 70 livestock attacks over 7 months, CDFW specialists ended up killing four of the pack's wolves.

While that action was the first lethal removal of depredating wolves in the state, CDFW released the news that there are still 10 existing packs, with most of them causing little or no harm to livestock. Six wolf families in the state were documented to have 31 pups this year.

In 2023, wolves known as the Yowlumni pack established a territory south of our area in eastern Tulare County. Two adults were found dead from unknown reasons early this year, while a third wolf was judged to have died from an infection. Wolves were still detected afterwards in the territory, but the pack's current status is unclear. Since at least some of the Yowlumni pack members were found to be genetically linked to packs in Northern California, **they likely moved through our region in their travels.**

No wolves have been detected between the Tahoe area and Yosemite during the past four years. **Share any sightings!**



After years of negotiations, the giant MAC Project nears the finish line



Those who've read past newsletters will know that our Center has invested years of efforts into collaborating with other forest stakeholders in the Amador Calaveras Consensus Group (ACCG). After more than a decade of partnering, members of ACCG have spent the last three years developing a truly gigantic project that is intended to reduce wildfire risk, produce jobs and wood products, and get forest areas back into a healthier condition.

As designed, the MAC Project proposes forest thinning, prescribed fire, fuel breaks, and biomass treatments within a 247,000-acre area that includes the Amador District of the Eldorado National Forest and the Calaveras District of the Stanislaus National Forest.

The project development and the extensive surveys necessary to move such a giant project through planning were led by the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority (UMRWA). Water districts and counties that are members of UMRWA contributed significant funding to hire consultants and to pay for surveys.

CSERC staff has repeatedly praised the UMRWA team for not only the quality of their work, but also for consistently aiming to develop project treatments that are in line with ACCG stakeholder agreements. Those consensus agreements include the minimal use of herbicides, no commercial logging in wild roadless areas, protection for large, old trees, and meaningful protection for at-risk wildlife species.

With a broad diversity of stakeholders in the ACCG group, consensus agreements were often challenging to reach. Timber interests, foresters, and those most concerned about economics sometimes had different objectives for forest management than CSERC, other conservation interests, and concerned citizens. But thanks to good facilitation, ACCG members appear to have reached agreement as the final design of the MAC Project moves closer to a decision by the Forest Service.



If the Project can gain full ACCG support, that would increase the potential for UMRWA and ACCG be willing to apply for millions of dollars in State grants to implement the plan.

Given the uncertainty of national politics and the upheaval that the Forest Service faces as an agency, CSERC is not assuming that the MAC Project will smoothly reach the finish line without drama. But after so many years of collaboration, we hope that full consensus can be reached so that vast areas of national forest can receive positive treatments.

It was a record-breaking year for CSERC's restoration workdays!



Thanks to our passionate volunteers and dedicated staff, CSERC led 18 volunteer workdays this year to implement a wide range of restoration treatments in the local region.

Over the long field season, we removed truckloads of invasive weeds and cut thousands of encroaching conifers from meadow habitat. We built and repaired fences to keep livestock out of degraded meadows and at-risk fen areas. We collected countless seeds from native grasses and sedges, and planted them in bare, denuded meadow and riparian areas.

CSERC volunteers also assisted the Forest Service with the rehabilitation of a neglected interpretive trail that helps to educate users about local forest ecology.

Over the year our Center also planned and implemented numerous successful “staff-only” workdays where we fenced degraded meadows and fens, trained others in fencing techniques, removed piles of trash, and partnered with the Forest Service to maintain some of their carefully selected rust-resistant sugar pines.

Doing hands-on restoration projects can at times be hard work, but partnering with other like-minded staff and volunteers is almost always a reward that more than makes up for sore muscles or being tired at the end of the day. And it is not a secret that there are often witty and funny workday moments that add to the sense of having fun while doing something meaningful.



FROM ALL OF US ON THE CSERC STAFF: THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO GAVE TIME AND ENERGY TO ASSIST WITH HIGHLY NEEDED PROJECTS TO BENEFIT NATURE ACROSS OUR ICONIC REGION!

As we look ahead to next year, we encourage you to sign up now to become a volunteer. If you would like to learn more, please contact Chelsea of our staff at chelsea@cserc.org or call her at (209) 586-7440.



CSERC defends nature for those who love the mountains

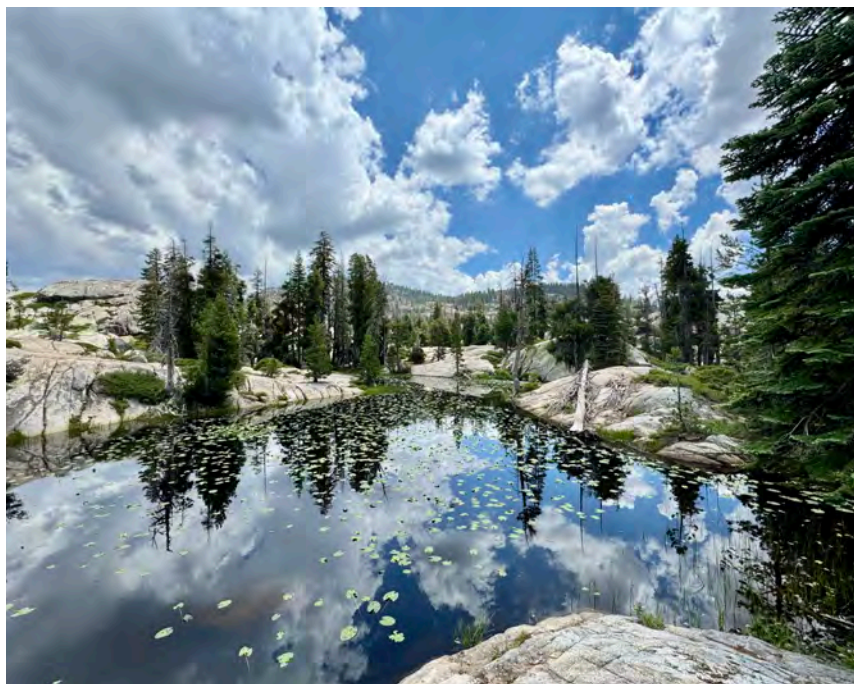


Photo of Granite Lake by Christy Huff

To do our Center's wide range of efforts to protect water, wildlife, and wild places across the Northern Yosemite region, CSERC depends entirely on our members' tax-deductible contributions and on grants from foundations.

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

We deeply value our partnerships and are committed to stretching every dollar towards our mission.

Please visit www.cserc.org and click on "Donate" to give. Your support truly matters. Thank you!

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Colorful life forms in ice and snow; there's more than meets the eye



At first glance, snow and ice may appear devoid of life. But upon closer inspection, both ice and snow can be bustling with organisms!

If you've ever seen patches of pink or red-colored snow, or "watermelon snow" (like in the photo), you've seen snow-dwelling algae. Snow and ice can also be home for bacteria and ciliates (a highly abundant microscopic life form), as well as larger organisms such as springtails (jumpy arthropods just a few millimeters in length) that feed on snow-dwelling bacteria, algae, and protozoans.

The next time you walk across the snow, take a moment to think about the countless tiny life forms that may be under your feet.

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