

TUOLUMNE COUNTY



COUNTY INFORMATION

Size: 5,891 sq. km (2,274 sq. mi)
Population: 56,855 (2006 U.S. Census)
Location: Central Sierra Nevada
Official Website: www.co.tuolumne.ca.us

CONSERVATION STORY

CSERC and Volunteers Protect the Sierra Nevada from Septic Contamination

For the past 18 years, a small non-profit organization with a large name has served on the frontlines defending the environment of over 2,000,000 acres north and west of Yosemite National Park. The Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center (CSERC) relies upon its tiny staff - one executive director and two staff scientists - to advocate for open space, rare wildlife, free-flowing rivers, clean water, and protection of spectacular forest groves in this world-renowned region.

CSERC carefully reviews all development proposals that come up for approval in both Tuolumne County and Calaveras County. For all development projects with potentially

harmful environmental and public health impacts, CSERC staff provide detailed written input and testify at county hearings. While much of the Center's focus ties to water and watershed issues, CSERC also focuses on the impact of land development on the foothill's oak woodlands, open space, and biological values.

CSERC staff rely on CEQA and General Plan requirements to press for mitigation for each development project's environmental impacts. Unfortunately, even under CEQA, county officials in both counties have allowed many massive subdivisions and commercial projects to harm the region's ecology. Developers have bulldozed extensive stands of oaks, scalped ridge tops, paved over crucial wildlife habitat, and consumed precious water resources -- often with only minimal mitigation. Consistently land development policies in both Tuolumne and Calaveras counties have favored developers, rather than protective of at-risk resources or open space values.

One such example was Tuolumne County's two-year debate over its septic system regulations. In the southern end of Tuolumne County, a broad area of shallow soil and volcanic rock surrounds Lake Don Pedro reservoir. Over the years, developers gained approval for many development projects on sites where shallow soils and underlying rock provided few suitable sites for septic systems.



In late 2005 when a number of prospective new developments around the reservoir were being proposed, a shift in County personnel led to a stricter application of the septic guidelines. The strict enforcement of the septic guidelines created a huge backlash of anger from developers, realtors, and individual lot owners. Many of them suddenly faced requirements for very expensive engineered septic systems. In many cases, sites with less than a foot of soil were prevented from gaining building permits without assurances that highly engineered septic systems were feasible.

The outcry from developers and realtors was loud and intense. Environmentalists were ridiculed as overly worried about water quality, fecal coliform, or the spread of disease from leaking septic systems.

A number of county board of supervisor sessions were dominated by complaints, threats of lawsuits, and verbal attacks on CSERC staff scientists who testified in support of maintaining strict septic regulations. Politics rose in intensity - and sunk to a new low - as one key county staff person reported personal threats for enforcing the septic regulations.

But CSERC and supportive local conservationists stuck to the facts, undertook months of research, and discovered documented proof in county files that septic systems had already failed and contaminated wells. CSERC staff also reached out to local community activists to attend county-led septic policy "workshop" debates. The local leader of the Sierra Club and other citizens concerned about water contamination joined with CSERC staff and raised opposition to county-endorsed proposals intended to significantly weaken the existing septic guidelines.

After nearly two years of meetings, debates, and acrimony, a majority of the County's board of supervisors voted to ask the State Water Board to accept weakened septic regulations. They requested a change in policy to drop the septic system requirements from a minimum of two feet to one foot of soil; to eliminate the requirement to have native soil -- and to instead allow sand/rock; and to allow bedrock to be defined as the point where a backhoe could no longer crack or tear up the rock any further. These revisions would have allowed marginal septic systems and new development on hundreds of lots where septic systems would be almost certain to fail over time -- contaminating downstream or subsurface water.

The State Board declined to approve Tuolumne County's request for support of the weaker septic policies - leaving the County with a choice between doing expensive CEQA analysis of the new policy changes or working within existing rules. Pro-development forces rallied again to press County officials to weaken the policies.

Thankfully, CSERC staff and community activists testified effectively and the conservation side was able to hold back any immediate weakening of county septic policies. While a majority of Tuolumne County supervisors made no effort to conceal



their leaning towards the pro-development forces on the septic issue, they nevertheless agreed to retain the existing requirements.

As of late summer, 2008, the existing regulations are still intact. Such vigilance on behalf of environmental policies does not always end as successfully, at least not in Tuolumne or Calaveras counties, but in this situation, citizen involvement and conservation group advocacy

helped turn back an environmentally-harmful change in policy.

For CSERC staff, attending long meetings, reviewing dry policy documents, or engaging in advocacy efforts over technical issues is often boring, draining, and frustrating. The septic policy debate was just one small part of CSERC's overall planning efforts. Yet

such work is pivotal to protecting the environment of California. When local citizens combine their enthusiasm and dedication with the expertise and credibility of professional environmental groups, at the very least nature now has a stronger voice. Decision-makers can't ignore the potential impacts of their votes, and sometime, just sometimes, that will make all the difference in a community.

To find out more about the wide range of issues and programs that CSERC takes on to defend nature or if you wish to donate to the Center's efforts, go to www.cserc.org or e-mail the Center at: johnb@cserc.org if you have any questions. CSERC also provides free environmental slide show programs in urban areas around Turlock, Modesto, and Stockton -- reaching more than 5,000 students each year in an effort to expand awareness about forests, rivers, wildlife, and wild places of California.

ORGANIZATIONS

Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center (CSERC)

Contact Name: John Buckley, Executive Director

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Phone: (209) 586-7440

Email: johnb@cserc.org

Website URL: www.cserc.org

Counties of Activity: Calaveras, Tuolumne

Issue Focus: all

Public Events: CSERC provides free environmental education programs to more than 5,000 students per year at schools throughout the Central Valley and foothill region

Volunteer Opportunities: workday restoration projects on public lands

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: For the past 17 years, CSERC has led forest, wildlife, land planning, wildland, and water protection efforts in a 2,000,000 acre region stretching from Yosemite to the North Fork Mokelumne River and from the foothills to the crest of the Sierra Nevada. CSERC reviews every proposed development project within a vast region of the foothills, and provides fieldwork, detailed written comments, and testimony at hearings for all major projects. CSERC reviews each and every timber harvest plan on private timberlands and every proposed project (including timber sales) for the Stanislaus National Forest. CSERC staff includes two staff scientists who engage in water sampling, wildlife photo-detection surveys for rare wildlife, and extensive field monitoring of meadows and stream areas on public lands of the region. CSERC deals with every major environmental issue in the world-renowned region of Northern Yosemite.

Restore Hetch Hetchy

Contact Name: Ron Good, Executive Director

Address: P.O. Box 3538, Sonora, CA 95370

Phone: (209) 533-4481

Email: info@hetchhetchy.org

Website URL: www.hetchhetchy.org

County of Activity: Tuolumne

Issue Focus: botanical, water supply, watershed quality, wildlife and habitat

Group Type: advocacy, litigation, outreach

Public Events: information tables at fairs & festivals; slide show and video presentations for environmental, civic, governmental, and business organizations

Volunteer Opportunities: information tables at fairs & festivals; making slide show and video presentations; interacting with local, state, and federal public officials

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: The mission of Restore Hetch Hetchy is to restore Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley and the Tuolumne River which runs through it.

Restore Hetch Hetchy seeks to obtain a "win-win" outcome for all the stakeholders: Yosemite National Park, San Francisco Bay Area water & power users, Central Valley irrigation districts, recreational boaters, and Native Americans. Several engineering studies have been completed describing "win-win" ways to replace water storage and electrical power: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (1988); University of California-Davis (2003); Environmental Defense (2004), and Restore Hetch Hetchy (2005). In July 2006, the Schwarzenegger Administration's Department of Water Resources (DWR) released a report which found that it is "technically feasible" to restore Hetch Hetchy Valley and that there are "no fatal flaws" in the restoration concept. The DWR report recommended that \$7 million be spent, in cooperation with the federal government, to complete a more in-depth analysis of restoration. In February 2007, the President's budget recommended that \$7 million be spent to further study Hetch Hetchy's restoration.

Tuolumne River Trust

Contact Name: Cynthia King, Galen Weston

Address: PO Box 933, Sonora, CA 95370 (mailing)

Phone: (209) 588-8636

Email: Cynthia@tuolumne.org; galen@tuolumne.org

Website URL: www.tuolumne.org

Counties of Activity: Bay Area counties, Tuolumne, Stanislaus

Issue Focus: botanical, water supply, watershed quality, and wildlife and habitat

Group Type: staffed, volunteer
Methods: advocacy, education, restoration

Public Events: regular outings in the upper watershed, fall canoe trips on the Lower Tuolumne

Volunteer Opportunities: tabling, leading hikes, restoration work

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: Founded in 1981, the Tuolumne River Trust's mission is to promote the stewardship of the Tuolumne River and its tributaries to ensure a healthy watershed. Our strategic approach melds advocacy, education, coalition building, and scientific inquiry to address threats to the watershed and take advantage of opportunities to protect and restore this California jewel. As the only organization working throughout the Watershed, the Trust is connecting people to the Tuolumne River and forging ties between Sierra, Valley, and Bay Area communities. The Trust believes that serious river restoration and protection efforts, strategic land acquisitions, and improved water flow policies create a healthier river for people and a habitat sanctuary for spawning fish, riparian species, waterfowl, and other wildlife.

Our Sierra Nevada program is focused on protecting the Clavey River, a major tributary of the Tuolumne, and one of the few remaining free-flowing Sierra streams. The Trust organizes support for wild and scenic designation of the Clavey, in addition to working with a local stakeholder group to develop a collaborative watershed plan.

PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND AGENCIES

Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors

Mailing Address:

2 South Green St., Sonora, CA 95370

Phone: (209) 533-5521

Website: www.tuolumnecounty.ca.gov

Senate Representative – 14th District:

Counties Represented: Mariposa, Madera, San Joaquin, Fresno, Tuolumne and Stanislaus

Website: <http://republican.sen.ca.gov/web/14/>

Assembly Representative – 25th District

Counties Represented: Calaveras, Tuolumne, Mariposa, Madera, Mono
Website: <http://republican.assembly.ca.gov/members/a25/index.aspx>