

Mariposa Gazette.



"Covering Mariposa County Like The Stars"

Established 1854 — 167th Year

Official County Newspaper

Mariposa, California • Thursday, July 29, 2021 • Issue No. 30 • \$1.00

Unmasking Covid

Drastic spike in cases leads to masking recommendation by county health officer

By CHRISTINA MANUEL
Staff Writer

In the last seven days Mariposa County has reported 19 positive Covid-19 cases — an increase that hasn't been seen since April.

And although sequencing results have not yet been received by the local health department, Mariposa County Health Officer Dr. Eric Sergienko, anticipates

the Delta variant will be present.

"It's not something we weren't expecting, but we weren't expecting this large number so fast," Sergienko said.

As reported on July 20 by Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Delta variant now makes up 83 per-

See COVID on Page A-10

Schools will require masks for students

By ALLEN LAMAN
Staff Writer

Some school restrictions will soften. But masks will remain.

Local educators expected all Covid-19-related restrictions, guidelines and health mandates to be lifted going into the 2021-22 school year. This is not the case.

"So, we're disappointed," said Jeff Aranguena, superintendent of Mariposa County Unified Schools. "But with that said, for all of us who have lived through this over the last 15 months, there are some good things

that come out of this that get us back to normalcy."

Relaxed restrictions

Statewide facial covering guidance from the California Department of Public Health will require staff and students to mask up indoors when they head back to school — regardless of vaccination status. This policy does not apply to kids who are exempt from wearing a face covering under state guidelines. The rule will be re-examined in November.

See SCHOOLS on Page A-10

Inside this week

Photo by Nicole W. Little
Hanna Wackerman and Mariposa County Sheriff Jeremy Briese are shown in this photo taken at AutoCamp Yosemite. Briese and Wackerman were winners in the annual "Readers' Choice" contest voted on by newspaper readers. This week, there is a special section devoted to the contest. It begins on page C-1.



Photo by Greg Little

Members of the Sierra Foothills Conservancy are shown looking over a map of their work. From left are Nancy Fluharty, Lauren Miller, Zeus Garcia, Jessica Thompson and Sue Overstreet.

Endlessly satisfying

For those at the Sierra Foothills Conservancy, that sums it up in a nutshell

Editor's note: This is the third in an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothills Conservancy. The stories will run monthly through the end of the year.

By GREG LITTLE
Editor

What happens when you put five passionate people in a room to talk about the things they love?

You get a lot of information — along with some humor and an insight into the workings of their organization.

Last week, five people connected to the Sierra Foothills Conservancy sat down for an in-depth interview about the group, what it does, what it means and how they feel.

The Sierra Foothills Conservancy (SFC) is a land trust organization based in Mariposa with roots in the local community. Its mission is to preserve land in the region which they consider special places for generations to come.

Here is the vision statement of SFC: "From the snow-capped Sierra to the Central Valley floor, expansive landscapes, important habitats, and clean water

resources are conserved and managed to ensure continuing public benefits. SFC supports a thriving land-based economy while promoting a conservation ethic that spans generations."

That, in a nutshell, is what the conservancy is all about and the people who work toward that goal are passionate, knowledgeable and sincere in their work.

For Sue Overstreet, she was involved in a similar group in Napa County and when she came back home to Mariposa County, she had one question: "Why not a land trust in Mariposa County?"

To that end, Overstreet decided a local meeting would be in order to toss out the idea. About 20 people came.

"That was the beginning," said Overstreet.

Overstreet has a long family history in the county as her maiden name would indicate to most locals — Trabucco.

"I am a strong believer in land trusts," said Overstreet.

A native of Mariposa, Overstreet said she believes people come here because "they enjoy what it looks like when you have ranch land and foothills with no development."

She emphasizes there's nothing wrong with development, in fact she knows it is a sign of progress, but it has to be "somewhat planned."

Another aspect of being involved with SFC, said Overstreet, is how it "brings" so many people and groups together, including government entities who they work with on a regular basis.

Overstreet was a founding member of the group and has gotten "re-involved" over the past few years serving as a board member.

For Jessica Thompson, her road to being operations manager at SFC actually began in her hometown of Truckee, where she and her sister were a "professional lizard catching team."

See FOOTHILLS on Page A-9

Cutter invokes the 'sovereign-citizen' movement as trial date draws nearer

By GREG LITTLE
Editor

It was a strange scene inside the Mariposa County Courthouse last week when a local man accused of sexual crimes against a minor began a rambling speech which was sometimes incoherent and invoked the "sovereign-citizen movement."

The hearing before Mariposa County Superior Court Judge Michael Fagalde was for trial readiness in the case against Michael Cutter, 31, who is charged with a litany of felonies following his arrest on March 19 in Catheys Valley.

Cutter faces the following charges: sexual battery; enticing a minor for illegal sex, aiding and abetting; assault with intent to commit a felony; penetration by foreign object; child annoying; using minor for sex acts; unnatural or abnormal sexual interest in children; possession of a firearm by a felon; violation of parole; and possession of marijuana for sale by a registered sex offender.

The trial for Cutter is set to begin at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 17 in superior court.

Also arrested on March 19 was Dallas Elaine Stroming, 27, who faces multiple charges. She recently entered into an agreement with the Mariposa County District Attor-

See CUTTER on Page A-8

MPUD now working on settlement with group seeking public records

By CHRISTINA MANUEL
Staff Writer

Was it a misunderstanding or miscommunication? Or maybe a classic case of emails getting sent to the spam folder.

Whatever it was, Susan Wages, the general manager of the Mariposa Public Utility District (MPUD), is being sued by Nevada Policy Research Institute (NPRI) after allegedly not releasing requested information via the California Public Records Act.

After the last case management hearing between MPUD and NPRI before Mariposa Superior Court Judge Michael Fagalde on June 30, the two entities have come to reach a tentative settlement. But nothing has yet been finalized.

On Oct. 16, 2020, Special Districts Transparent California (SDTC), a service provided by NPRI, requested a copy of the district's employee compensation report for 2019 via email.

"We're entitled to that. We're going to get that if they want to fight it all the way."

—Robert Fellner

See MPUD on Page A-8

Visit us at **MARIPOSAGAZETTE.COM**

Check us out on Social Media



Like us on Facebook



Follow us on Instagram



Call Us Today (209) 966-2500



0 51497 03749 9

FOOTHILLS

From Page A1

Thompson has had a “long career in wildlife,” she said, doing field work and just about anything else you can imagine.

She is a biologist with a background working with aquatic species in Yosemite National Park, including the reintroduction of the Western Pond Turtle.

“Jessica has a fantastic compliment of strong scientific field skills and organizational and administrative skills,” said Bridget Fithian, executive director of SFC.

“It is really fun to be on the administrative team,” said Thompson, who has been with the organization for three years.

She said land conservation “doesn’t happen in a bubble,” and Thompson has seen the various aspects of what it means.

She worked in Yosemite, a big national park with a high profile, at a campground in the El Portal area where she saw the “small, confined areas” of the Sierra National Forest and now with SFC, where she is seeing the aspect from the viewpoint of the residents of gateway communities to the forest and park.

Land trusts, she said, “are the local community. It is a collective perspective.”

Having been on the different sides of the issues, Thompson said it is critical to have private land preserved because that compliments the adjacent public lands and allows plants, wildlife and more to thrive.

“It is a combination of both,” said Thompson. For Zeus Garcia, he’s just a newbie with SFC, having worked there for the past five months.

That, however, does not make him less passionate. Garcia, whose first name is actually Jesus but who earned the nickname Zeus from a “friend in need,” calls himself “boots on the ground” for the conservancy.

His background is as an arborist and he lives smack dab in the middle of the SFC area in Coarsegold. SFC serves Mariposa, Madera and parts of Fresno and Merced counties. His main focus is working on restoration and land management projects and he assists with the rangeland management program.

One of his duties is to “check on” the many preserves which are the responsibility of the conservancy.

His career began mowing yards where he grew up in the Central Valley. From there, his career “kept evolving,” said Garcia, and eventually landed him with SFC.

Garcia said his duties in the first few months have been varied, and he has also witnessed the impacts of the ongoing drought and the heat waves which have choked this region and most of the West.

He said “just last week,” he noticed the blue oak trees were “not doing well” because of the weather situation. That is a concern, he said, and something they will continue to monitor.

Garcia calls his work at SFC “fascinating,” and said he thinks his career path and the needs of the group were a good match.

“I like to think SFC found me,” said Garcia. For Lauren Miller, conservation director at SFC, being a part of the organization seemed like a natural fit. She’s a native of Mariposa who helps manage her family’s forest operation and is now married to a cattle rancher.

“She understands the importance of our work from the perspective of the landowner/cattle rancher and from the organization’s perspective,” said Fithian.

Miller has been with the conservancy for eight years. “I love my job,” she said. “It is helping others. That’s what drives me to continue our work.”

As the director of conservation, Miller’s job is to work on securing lands to be conserved.

But what is a conservation easement? “It is a voluntary, perpetual, legal agreement that is recorded to the property,” said Miller.

What that means is once an agreement has been reached, the landowner allows for certain conditions on the property. A lot of it has to do with not having major development.

“We have a line at the door of people who want to do this,” said Miller.

Miller said “one of the key components” of the agreement is the conservancy owns the rights of “what the landowner agreed to.”

In some cases, the easement is a monetary transaction, and Miller said that can help people in many ways. In other cases, landowners voluntarily put their land into an easement.

She cited the 7,000 acres of the Hornitos Ranch as a prime example. The agreement “prevents development and fragmentation” of the property, said Miller.



Submitted photo

Lauren Miller and Billy Freeman are show doing a tour of the Freeman property.

It should also be emphasized part of the goal of conservation is to allow traditional uses, including cattle ranching.

Now “married into the ranching community,” Miller said she has an “entirely newfound respect and appreciation for people who own land for the purpose of raising cattle.”

Miller also knows that farmers and ranchers are, in general, some of the best conservationists and environmentalists.

“Their job is to manage land in a way to create a by-product,” not the reverse, she said.

She said large landowners “have an array of options” when it comes to how to preserve the land, including “protecting what a family has built over generations.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Miller also deals with developers who also want land preserved to go along with their developments.

“I never thought I’d work with developers,” said Miller.

She called SFC “a bridge” between landowners and those who want to see conservation to preserve what this region has to offer.

“We want to protect the legacy, protect the wildlife and protect the resources,” said Miller.

She added there are “massive public benefits to the ecosystem being protected.”

For Nancy Fluharty, development program manager at SFC, just listening to everyone talk about their passions brought out the passion in her.

“It is so nice to hear everyone’s passion,” said Fluharty. Fluharty is a native of Mariposa who moved back here in 2015 after spending 15 years in education.

She said that move opened her eyes about how lucky she was to be able to grow up here and experience what this area has to offer.

“We completely take it for granted,” said Fluharty. “I have always been someone who likes nature,” added Fluharty.

After moving back, she said “it really clicked for me.” That “click” was knowing land preservation is critical, including some of the land that is available for public use, like the Stockton Creek Preserve, a shining jewel in the crown of conservation work for Fluharty.

That large preserve is located adjacent to Mariposa and is utilized by many people who meander the trails and just enjoy the place.

Seeing the land preserved, and used, has had an impact on Fluharty. She said once “you see land from that perspective, you can’t unsee it.”

That, said Fluharty, keeps her motivated. “I can’t imagine more important work to do right now,” said Fluharty.

Why they do what they do

Overstreet believes “the majority of people are here because of the way it looks.”

She also thinks the work of the conservancy “bridges the political viewpoints” and people can find “common ground.”

She said during various SFC fundraisers, “politics is not part of those events.”

Thompson said one mission of the conservancy is to “build connected corridors,” especially for wildlife and plants. She called those corridors “crucial.”

One issue which is in the worldwide spotlight is climate change and the impacts it is having on everything from humans to aquatic life to cows.

“I do see it,” said Garcia. “Most importantly, I hear it.”

Garcia spends a lot of time talking with ranch owners who point out how things are different these days. They talk about where “the snow line used to be,” and many other issues, he said.

“I’ve adapted a lot already,” said Garcia. “It has led me to this point.”

From mowing lawns to now seeing directly how nature interacts, Garcia said he realizes “I have been a conservationist the whole time.”

He grew up in a farm town in the Central Valley where “the older folks, they talked about water.”

That conversation still goes on to this day and it has had an impact on Garcia.

“It’s opened my eyes,” he said. “An important aspect is we work in partnership,” said Thompson.

She cited examples like fuels reduction to prevent wildfires as well as fire breaks which are constructed. Thompson said there is a “huge push” for wildfire risk reduction “to help improve properties.”

That is a driving force behind

the conservancy, and Overstreet said many people are supportive through financial donations and more.

“Many sources,” said Overstreet when asked where the funding comes from.

Also, she said, all of the issues have changed the landscape — both literally and on the conservation front.

“I can see how complicated it has gotten,” said Overstreet.

Miller sees a wide swath of what the organization does, from wearing “heels and a blazer” to meet with lawmakers in Sacramento to being on a ranch that has been conserved.

“Most of the people we work with are passionate,” said Miller. “I feel lucky to be able to work with people outside of my bubble.”

That can mean a liberal lawmaker from the Bay Area or a conservative landowner who sees the benefit of preserving land.

“We all intersect, at least at some point,” said Miller.

She also said listening is a crucial part of her job and has found that people of all stripes can find common ground and relate to the importance of land conservation.

In some ways, while sitting at the desk in her office, Miller jokes she has become a “keyboard conservationist.”

She also knows that although SFC, and many other similar groups, are about conserving land, there is a more important aspect.

“So much of this work, you picture the land,” said Miller. “But it’s about the people.”

It’s also about the wildlife, said Thompson. “It’s a hard time for wildlife,” said Thompson.

She said issues like climate change, drought, wildfires, floods and tree mortality, to name just a few, are causing stress to animals.

As an example, she said in some cases, what used to take one acre of land to sustain an animal now takes five.

“That’s why connectivity and transitions zones are so important,” said Thompson.

She thinks back to the Western Pond Turtles and how they were reintroduced to Yosemite National Park after being gone for decades.

That happened because they partnered with SFC and used the Stockton Creek Preserve as the hatching ground for the turtles which would eventually be introduced back into the park. It so happens that preserve is private land with public access; making the public-private partnership point all the more important for everyone involved with the conservancy.

Working together — locally

“These people have all of those skill sets,” said Overstreet as she looked around the room.

“That is the hallmark of our culture,” said Miller.

Another hallmark is having local people working at SFC.

“It sure opens a lot of doors,” said Fluharty. “There is a trust immediately and people are more willing to listen.”

Fluharty said she cannot “imagine a better work environment.”

Miller said having those local connections is “deeply important. It is part of who I am. It is literally to conserve and protect that land. It is personal. I feel very fortunate.”

She also said working for SFC has given her a “whole newfound love for our region.”

Overstreet was asked why she continues to dedicate so much effort to the conservancy.

“Because it is a really positive way to spend time,” she said.

Overstreet also said she believes attitude are changing locally and thinks that is positive.

“It seems like a much better place than it was years ago,” said Overstreet.

Thompson referenced a speech made by Fluharty at a recent event hosted by the conservancy.

In that speech, Fluharty was talking about a place she went to as a child on Ben Hur Road; a place she could reflect and “go think.”

Not long ago, Fluharty was able to take her two-year-old daughter to that same place — and it had been preserved forever.

“For me, it’s about connections,” said Thompson. “It’s a massive spider web. It crosses political boundaries. You can draw a line to anything in the natural world.”

“Passion,” said Garcia. “A huge amount of passion. I have to put everything into it.”

Garcia said part of his work takes him back in time — way back.

“I wonder what the Central Valley looked like before humans,” said Garcia.

In his work, he can sometimes get a sense of that working in remote areas and seeing nature at its finest — preserved.

“I love people, I love land,” said Garcia. “I’m really happy everyday. This is where I belong.”

For Fluharty, her Mariposa roots are a driving force behind her work at the conservancy.

“I want my daughter to have the same opportunities I have had to connect to the landscape,” said Fluharty. “I want her to have the same benefits, the same connections to the natural world.”

Fluharty called her profession “endlessly satisfying.”

That probably sums up the feelings of everyone at the Sierra Foothills Conservancy.



Submitted photo

Angie Sberna is shown along Merced Falls Road doing some planting work.