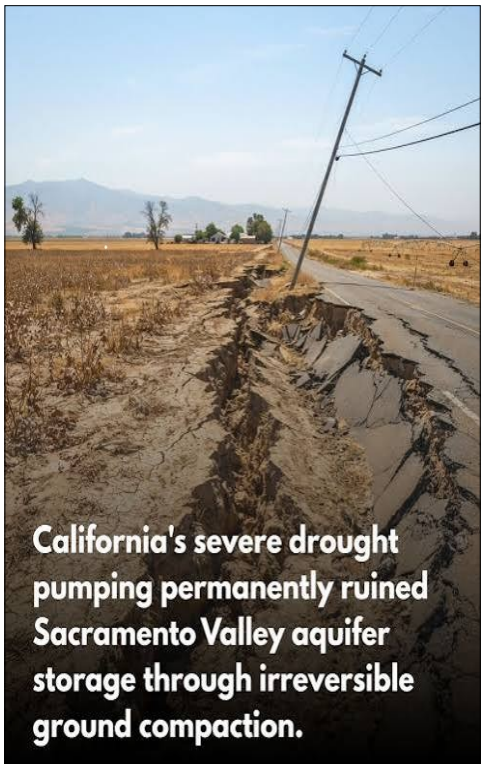


Fairness Requires Balance

By Marty Dunlap

Over the last few years, I have worked closely with the Butte County Department of Water, members of the Vina Subbasin Board and Stakeholder Advisory Committee, domestic well owners, farmers with small acreage, the citizens of Chico and environmentalists to ensure all stakeholders' voices are heard in creating a fair, practical and balanced Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) for the Butte County Vina Subbasin.

My observation in attending many meetings and reviewing multiple reports is that regardless of a reported chronic lowering of groundwater levels (on average 20 feet over the last 25 years), the primary supposition is that there is no reason for concern. That everything is going to be okay.

I have further observed that decisions being made regarding the continued dropping of groundwater levels by unregulated pumping is being controlled by the agricultural representatives' domination on various local Boards. The lack of consideration of the needs and rights of all beneficial groundwater users and uses is coming at significantly and predictable risk to domestic well owners, farmers with shallow wells (e.g., vendors at the Farmers Market), and groundwater dependent ecosystems (GDE), particularly within the city of Chico.

The knowledge exists about what happens when groundwater is pulled down too low. Trees die and creeks and wells dry up. Demanding evidence by the representatives of the agricultural sector of possible damage that could occur for the other groundwater stakeholders is unnecessary. One does not need to be a "rocket scientist" to be aware of the evidence derived from other regions where excessive pumping of groundwater has had irreversible consequences. The lack of healthy tree canopies in regions such as the San Joaquin Valley, Owens Valley and the Ogallala Aquifer in the Midwest provide the evidence and consequences of excessive groundwater pumping. Over time, the same will happen here unless cautionary principles are adopted in our decision-making.

One of the ongoing objections to the criteria established in the 2022 GSP is that all stakeholder groups were not considered in the setting of the minimum threshold (MT). The primary group with whom consultation occurred was with folks from the agricultural sector. Yes, it is true that agriculture uses 90% of the Vina Subbasin groundwater but that doesn't mean that the agricultural sector gets 90% of the "say" in what are the preferred approaches to follow in maintaining the health and sustainability of the Vina Subbasin groundwater.

All stakeholders' interests must be fairly balanced. An imbalance in including all beneficial uses and users' interests in the Vina Subbasin groundwater was created by the establishment of an extremely low minimum threshold (MT) in the 2022 Groundwater Plan. To allow for fairness in the way we manage our groundwater, the assumption of risks by some stakeholders and the benefits gained by other stakeholders need to be balanced across all stakeholders.

This imbalance can be rectified in the five-year Periodic Evaluation happening now for the Vina Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan. The Plan and its respective amendments are due in January 2027 and will be voted on by the Vina Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) Board at their December 9 meeting.

Let the Vina GSA Board know what your thoughts are about balance and fairness regarding our shared groundwater either by letter or attending their meeting at 5 pm in the Chico City Council Chambers. See *https://groundwaterforbutte.org/* for more information.

Right Solar. Wrong Place

By Debra Lucero, Director of Special Projects, Water Education for Latino Leaders



Photograph of Blue Oak Woodland

CHICO, CA — For years, locals have called Butte Creek Canyon Butte County's "mini-Grand Canyon." From Lookout Point along the Skyway, visitors gaze across spectacular foothills toward Butte Creek, home to one of California's healthiest wild populations of threatened spring-run Chinook salmon.

Across the Skyway, rolling grazing lands are dotted with magnificent blue oaks, some estimated to be 200–300 years old. These resilient trees shelter wildlife, stabilize soil, sequester carbon and define a landscape unmistakably Butte County. Now, approximately 2,000 blue oaks face removal under Cenergy's proposed North Chico Solar project. (*https://ncs-solar.cenergypower.com/*)

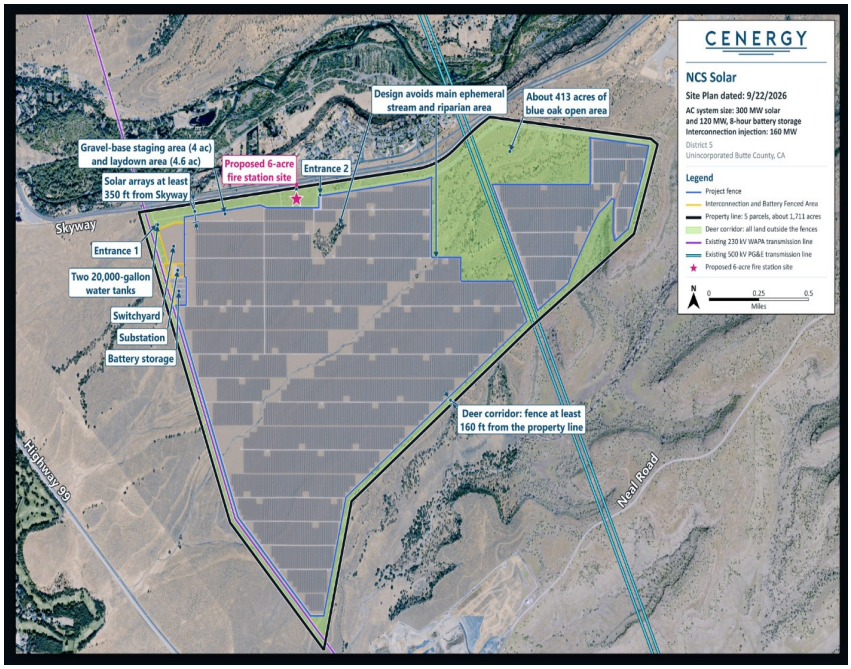
California desperately needs renewable energy. But does fighting climate change justify destroying the natural resources that help combat it?

Cenergy is proposing an industrial solar and battery-storage complex on approximately 1,700 acres southeast of Chico, along the Skyway toward Paradise. The project includes 250 megawatts of solar generation and 120 megawatts of battery storage.

The controversy has divided environmental advocates.

"Every place is environmentally sensitive," said Chico State sustainability expert Mark Stemen. "There are no good choices left because we have dragged our heels too long."

Stemen's argument is simply that the earth is running out of time. And … he's not wrong. Research shows that " … current climate policies put the world on a course for 2.8 degrees C of warming this century" according to a new United Nations "Emissions Gap" report, *(https://e360.yale.edu/digest/emissions-gap-2026)*



Site Illustration from Cenergy's Website, *(https://ncs-solar.cenergypower.com/#q7)*

Allen Harthorn, founder of Friends of Butte Creek, disagrees. "I just don't understand how you can justify despoiling this beautiful foothill scenic highway, blue oak woodland, burrowing owl habitat, likely tribal resources, in a wildfire zone and destroying the neighborhood and property values."
Harthorn's organization has spent decades protecting the Butte Creek watershed and is currently restoring floodplain habitat near the proposed development.

"This project is absolutely contrary to the conservation efforts we're trying to put forth," Harthorn said.

The disagreement reflects a difficult environmental dilemma.

More Than Trees at Stake

The North Chico Solar Project raises serious questions about groundwater recharge, build-out dust and disruption for two years, wildlife migration, agricultural land and scenic resources. The volcanic foothills have been identified as an important recharge area for the Tuscan Aquifer, which supplies groundwater to Chico and surrounding agricultural lands. Grading, stormwater runoff and proposed herbicide use warrant careful examination.

The project also occupies a high fire-hazard severity zone near the Skyway, a critical evacuation route during the devastating 2018 Camp Fire where adjacent properties were burned. Industrial battery storage adds another concern requiring rigorous review. Cenergy reports 5.7 acres will be dedicated to battery storage.

California Native Plant Society representatives have emphasized that rare species evolved to thrive in these thin volcanic soils. Blue oak woodlands provide their own climate benefits, and their destruction cannot easily be reversed. Local ranchers and agricultural organizations have also questioned the conversion of active grazing land into an industrial energy complex.

Who Decides?

Cenergy is pursuing certification through the California Energy Commission's Opt-In Program, (*https://www.energy.ca.gov/programs-and-topics/topics/power-plants/opt-certification-program)* established under Assembly Bill 205. This state-level process could approve the project without traditional county land-use approval. The commission generally has 270 days to decide after receiving a complete application.

At its October 27 meeting, the Butte County Board of Supervisors declined to consider Cenergy's proposed community benefits agreement until an application is available. Earlier, the Butte County Resource Conservation District rejected a proposed $250,000 agreement. Its provisions included restrictions on challenging or opposing the project. Cenergy has shopped approximately $5 million in community benefits to local organizations and public agencies.

Meanwhile, the newly formed Foothills Coalition has launched its Save Our Skyway campaign, (*https://claude.ai/artifact/SCFcdghKgHTPmaJmVkrmLq)* bringing together neighbors, ranchers, environmentalists and community advocates. The coalition is not opposing solar energy. It questions whether this environmentally sensitive location is appropriate and whether alternative sites have been seriously evaluated.

Access to existing Western Area Power Administration transmission lines makes the location attractive to developers. But transmission infrastructure exists elsewhere in Butte County.

The Real Environmental Test

California's climate target for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions or carbon neutrality by 2045 demands action, but urgency should not eliminate responsible siting, environmental scrutiny or meaningful public participation. The Skyway's blue oak woodlands have survived generations of drought, wildfire and development pressure. They shelter wildlife, store carbon and preserve a landscape that future generations deserve to inherit. The challenge facing California isn't simply how much renewable energy we can build. **It's how much of the natural world we're willing to sacrifice in the process.**

For information about the Foothills Coalition, contact ***saveourskyway@gmail.com***.

The Sierra Club's Activism Locally And Across the State: An Overview

By Grace M. Marvin, Conservation Chair of the Blue Oak Group; voting member of the Mother Lode Chapter's Conservation Committee.

What are conservation matters that Sierra Club California has been addressing? Major issues are those often examined by the national club as well. These include protecting:1- national monuments, 2-public lands, 3-old growth forests, and 4- endangered species. Others include 5-reducing fossil fuel use, 6-promoting renewable energy, 7-advocating for clean transportation, and 8-supporting public pensions that promote sustainable financing, e.g., not fossil fuels. Related tactics involve guiding labor and environmental organizations to focus on carbon removal in order to protect nature and ourselves. (For example, the club is very actively involved with efforts at influencing the legislature in Sacramento.)

A very recent and local example of the above campaign includes reservations expressed by many if not all environmentalists about a proposed solar farm and a data center in Butte County. Articles about the problems with the solar farm continue to be addressed in local news, including in Chico Sol, and the Enterprise Record.

We also have local activists fighting dioxin and tree removals in and around Oroville. Jean Marquart, on the Blue Oak board, has been very active here, with Sierra Club members such as Celeste Garcia. They meet with other people regularly in Oroville.

Another active body is the Sierra Club's California Conservation Committee (CCC), formerly called the California/Nevada Regional Conservation Committee. They address a wide range of state-level environmental, land-use, and climate policies across issue committees and task forces.

Their Major Issues include (as described online, below):

- **30x30 Task Force**: Partners with grassroots networks and state coalitions to advance land and coastal conservation, equity, and public access.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Committee**: Promotes farming systems that improve soil health, mitigate climate change, advance social equity, and protect ecosystem biodiversity.
- **Bay Alive Campaign**: Protects San Francisco Bay communities and wildlife through living shorelines, healthy waters, and equitable solutions to sea-level rise.
- **Desert Committee**: Works to protect and preserve arid lands and deserts across California and Nevada from destructive development.
- **Energy-Climate Committee**: Focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and energy use through affordable, community-based, and socially just clean energy pathways.
- **Water Committee**: Advocates for restoring the Bay-Delta ecosystem, protecting salmon and bird habitats, promoting water conservation, and ensuring water justice for disadvantaged communities.. (Sierra Club members and many others are expressing major concerns about the very low minimum threshold of the water level requirements in Butte County!)
- **Wilderness & Wildlife Committees**: Works to expand and protect state and federal wilderness areas and defends endangered species and critical wildlife habitats throughout the region.
- **Forests & Parks (Sequoia National Forest, State Forests, State Parks)**: Advocates fight against destructive logging practices like clearcutting and works to protect public forests and state parks. (Personal note: many of us are concerned about glyphosate (Round Up) being used to sterilize the soil in Lassen National Forest, where miles of trees were destroyed by fire recently.)
- **Transportation and Sustainable Communities:** Addresses local climate actions, zero-waste initiatives, and transit planning.

Please see ***http://www.sierraclub.org/California*** for recent stories as well as delightful photos of the volunteers involved.

2027 ExCom Election

By Suzette Welch, Chair Blue Oak Group Sierra Club

It is again time for Blue Oak Group Members to vote for people to represent them on the Blue Oak Group Executive Committee (ExCom). This year we have five empty seats and four candidates: Jane Coleman, Betty Volker, Jean Marquardt, and Suzette Welch.

Candidates statements are printed below. If you are a Blue Oak Group member, please take a few minutes to participate in this important process. Link to a ballot at
https://www.sierraclub.org/mother-lode/blue-oak/blue-oak-excom-ballot

Ballots should be printed, then filled out, folded, taped, stamped and mailed by December 31, 2026.

2027 ExCom Candidates

Jane Coleman

I am running to be re-elected to the Sierra Club Blue Oak Group Executive Board because I believe in the mission of the Sierra Club and wish to keep this mission active locally. I have been a Sierra Club member for over 30 years and have been active in outings, tabling, and Executive Board membership.

Jean Marquardt

I have been a forest activist since seeing hundreds and hundreds of clearcuttings in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on Google Earth. I am involved with Sierra Club Stop Clearcutting CA group and also with the Dioxin Education Committee to stop the biofuel plants in Butte County.

Betty Volker

I have been a member of the Blue Oak group for 30+ years. I have served as an outing leader, as singles chair, and on the Executive Committee a few times. If elected, I will continue to work for the betterment of the Blue Oak Group and Sierra Club.

Suzette Welch

I got involved with the Blue Oak Group Sierra Club ExCom in order to have more influence and involvement with group activities. Board members encouraged me to become co-chair and then Chair of the ExCom. I have been on the ExCom for 16 years. I am currently Chair of Blue Oak Group ExCom, Coeditor of the Newsletter and administrator of the Blue Oak Group Facebook Page.

I am very interested in improving our natural environment by supporting planting of trees, especially oaks; protecting our air; conserving and protecting water here in the North State; promoting and supporting clean energy; and encouraging people to get out and enjoy and appreciate our beautiful outdoors.

I am asking for your vote again so that I can continue to be on the Sierra Club Blue Oak Group ExCom.



Annual Holiday Potluck

Friday, December 11, 2026

By Suzette Welch, Chair Blue Oak Group Sierra Club

FRIDAY DECEMBER 11, 2026 will be the date for our annual Holiday Potluck. Once again it is to be held at Valley Oaks Village 1950 Wild Oak Lane, Chico, Ca. Party starts at 5:30 pm with dinner starting at 6:00 pm.

Limited parking so please carpool. Bring your own beer and wine. There will be a $5 charge for room rental and cleanup.

The annual Holiday Party is a good time to visit with old friends and meet some new people. So bring your favorite dish and plan to have a pleasant evening.

If you plan on attending, please notify Suzette Welch by e-mail ***booksontape@rocketmail.com*** or phone (530) 570-3240 stating number of people in your party and what you plan to bring.

2026 Blue Oak Group Sierra Club

Executive Committee

Chair: Suzette Welch
Secretary: Betty Volker
Treasurer: John Hollister
Board Member: Jane Coleman
Board Member: Grace Marvin
Board Member: Jane Marquardt

Committee Chairs & Contacts

Biomass Rep. to Sierra Club: Jean Marquardt
Rep. To Motherlode: Grace Marvin
Conservation Chair: Grace Marvin
Facebook Admin.: Suzette Welch
Forest Activist: Patricia Puterbaugh
Membership Chair: Position Open
Newsletter Editors: Suzette Welch, Louise Casey
Newsletter Advertising: Position Open
Newsletter Distribution: Steve Miller, Dave Nopel, and Suzette Welch
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Website: Louise Casey
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Newsletter Information

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For submissions, comments, or inquiries, contact: Suzette Welch, booksontape@rocketmail.com
530 570-3240. Please include name, phone number, and address with each submission. Short, single-topic articles are preferred. Deadlines for proposed articles and letters to the editor: February 1, May 1, August 1, and November 1.

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https://www.sierraclub.org/

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