

Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council celebrates PG&E transfer of Sierra Camp to create a new hub for outdoor education



(Photo: Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council)

Press Pool
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Camp purchase and upgrades make it possible for students to learn about California's forests and snowcapped mountains

News Release

Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council

The Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council (Stewardship Council) yesterday announced the transfer of a youth camp in the Sierras to the San Joaquin County Office of Education (SJCOE), the culmination of a multi-year effort involving the Wildlife Heritage Foundation (WHF), Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), thanks to a 2003 agreement with the State of California. The camp, now known as the Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center, will provide Central Valley youth with a unique outdoor education experience.

On December 22, 2020, following approval by the CPUC, PG&E donated 62 acres of Watershed Lands that encompass the camp on the shores of Lake Valley Reservoir in Placer County to the SJCOE as part of PG&E's Land Conservation Commitment. The donation of this Outdoor Education Center, as well as the earlier creation of the Stewardship Council itself, is part of a large package of public benefits that was ordered as part of the CPUC's review of PG&E's 2003 bankruptcy settlement that required PG&E to permanently conserve approximately 140,000 acres of PG&E Watershed Lands across the Sierra Nevada, southern Cascade, and Coastal mountain ranges. Over the past 17 years, the Stewardship Council has developed and approved plans to provide permanent public benefit, stewardship and conservation for lands held by PG&E for most of the last century.

"Making sure the people of California can forever enjoy these beautiful Watershed Lands has been a key objective of this entire process," said Marybel Batjer, President of the CPUC. "The Sky Mountain Center will be an ongoing public benefit for nearby communities. The CPUC is pleased to finally see the execution of this land donation occur after years of planning."

For the Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center transfer, the Stewardship Council funded the purchase of the buildings and equipment from the previous camp owner and operator that had leased the land from PG&E. As part of a larger enhancement grant, the Stewardship Council also funded necessary camp upgrades. The SJCOE intends to use the camp as an outdoor education center to connect youth to the natural world through a curriculum that aligns with the Next Generation Science Standards and California's Environmental Principles and Concepts. The Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center will also provide an ideal location for professional development for educational staff and offer community groups a natural setting for team building and outdoor recreation.

In addition to helping to facilitate nearly 100 different land transactions conserving PG&E's Watershed Lands, a major goal of the Stewardship Council is achieving synergy between land conservation efforts and connections with underserved youth on these properties. "Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center is a legacy project that will make the Sierra Nevada available to youth at a time when meaningful connections with nature are more important than ever," said Heidi Krolick, Executive Director of the Stewardship Council. Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center can

accommodate up to 200 people and the property is contiguous with other PG&E Watershed Lands being conserved near Yuba Gap off Interstate 80 in Placer County, adjacent to Lake Valley Reservoir.


The SJCOE is an innovative organization providing unique educational experiences for students. "The San Joaquin County Office of Education is very excited for all the new learning opportunities the Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center will provide students. The Sierra region is different from what our students experience living in the San Joaquin Valley. Sky Mountain will give them a chance to explore the High Sierras with its unique animal and plant life," said James Mousalimas, San Joaquin County Superintendent of Schools. "With more than 60 percent of our students in San Joaquin County living in some level of poverty, it can be difficult for families to provide outdoor experiences for children. At the Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center, we will seek to inspire a lifelong curiosity and wonder of nature and develop a new generation of innovative, ecologically literate community stewards and leaders."

Despite their proximity to the mountains, many San Joaquin County public school children have never been to the snow. The SJCOE aims to change that with the new Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center, which will offer critical outdoor education programs that stimulate learning and exploration for all students. Because of the proximity to the Bay Area and Sacramento, as well as other rural and suburban communities in Northern California, the camp will become a hub to promote youth programming and outdoor education.

"Students will learn about different ecosystems and how watersheds are connected. Snow is connected to rivers, rivers are connected to the Delta in San Joaquin County, and the Delta is connected to the ocean," SJCOE STEM Programs Director Annie Cunial said. "And year-round activities will range from canoeing and archery in the summer to snowshoeing in the winter," she said. "These activities will enhance students' experiences as they learn about the history of the land from the Native American tribes to early California explorers, as well as flora, hydroelectric dams, conifer forests, wildlife, industries, and careers."

Outdoor education is a priority for the SJCOE due to the positive impacts on students' academic success and the development of their personal and social skills. Studies show students who attend outdoor schools significantly raise their science scores, are more likely to engage in positive

environmental behaviors like recycling, and exhibit increases in confidence and self-esteem, positive relationships among peers, and reduced behavioral problems. For English Learners, a significant population in San Joaquin County at 19 percent, experiences at outdoor schools lead to gains in cooperation, leadership, relationships with peers, and a greater motivation to learn.



"My most treasured memories are probably going to be of science camp. It was so exciting and will always be remembered in my life."

- Shannon, Claudia Landeen School

PG&E's Watershed Lands encompass a diverse array of landscapes including forests, meadows and wetlands supporting a variety of habitats in 22 California counties. "At PG&E, we take the quality and protection of the region's water, land and other natural resources to heart. As part of this commitment, we work with the Stewardship Council to permanently protect the beneficial public values on the more than 140,000 acres of Watershed Lands associated with the PG&E hydroelectric system. Protecting these lands benefits current and future Californians," said Mike Schonherr, a director in PG&E's Power Generation department and member of the Stewardship Council board.

The Stewardship Council was charged with the protection of a diverse range of beneficial public values through the conveyance of conservation easements. The conservation easement over the Sky Mountain property is held by the Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a conservation organization protecting approximately 100,000 acres of outdoor space and wildlife habitat throughout the state of California. "The Sky Mountain Outdoor Education Center preserves an iconic area of the Sierra landscape and ensures that youth will continue to learn and enjoy the outdoors in perpetuity. WHF is thrilled to be part of this partnership which forwards our dual mission of conserving land and connecting youth to natural spaces," said Dr. Darla Guenzler, WHF Executive Director. "We congratulate our colleagues at the Stewardship Council, PG&E and SJCOE for creating this enduring legacy in the Sierra Nevada."

Learn more about the organizations involved at:

- Stewardship Council - stewardshipcouncil.org
- SJCOE - sjcoe.org
- WHF - wildlifeheritage.org
- CPUC - cpuc.ca.gov
- PG&E - pge.com

