

STEWARDS OF THE SEQUOIA

Non Profit 501c3
PO Box 1246
Wofford Heights, CA 93285

March 19, 2020

Forest Supervisor Teresa Benson
Sequoia National Forest
1839 South Newcomb
Porterville, CA 93257-2035

Re: Termination of Stewards Volunteer Agreement

Dear Supervisor Benson,

Recently Sequoia Kern River District Ranger Al Watson refused to renew a trail grant letter of support for our National Trail Stewardship grant which Stewards of the Sequoia have been awarded several times in past years. Ranger Al also refused to extend just released RAC trail grant funding that you approved for Stewards of the Sequoia.

Instead, Ranger Al emailed me requesting a meeting. When asked what the meeting subject would be, he refused to say. A mere eight minutes before the meeting was to commence Ranger Al emailed me the topic of the meeting and included an already dated and signed letter terminating Stewards of the Sequoia trail maintenance volunteer agreement (see attached), which had proven to be extremely successful for over 15 years running. When I called him for our meeting as directed, my call went to his voicemail. I left a message as well as emailed Ranger Al asking him to call me so that the meeting may start. Again, this meeting was requested and scheduled by Ranger Al. He did not call, and as a result we were unable to have the meeting he asked for and therefore unable to discuss any of his concerns. His actions were extremely unprofessional and hostile.

Ranger Al renewed the Stewards of the Sequoia volunteer agreement a mere two months ago, yet now out of the blue, Ranger Al has terminated Stewards seemingly without cause. What changed in the past two months and why were Stewards not allowed to respond to Ranger Al's issues prior to him making a decision?

In his letter, Ranger Al has no issue with any of Stewards of the Sequoia trail work and expresses appreciation for Stewards' assistance. However, he does take issue with matters unrelated to our volunteer trail maintenance citing text on the Stewards of the Sequoia website where we talk about the up to one mile proposed PCT Corridor. He claims this is misinformation because it is a half mile corridor on either side of the trail.

He also states that our continuing to question the validity of the 2010 Piute MVUM is grounds for termination of our trail maintenance agreement. Clearly the Piute MVUM is questionable, since the 2010 Sequoia ROD states the Piutes were removed from travel management. There was no Piute MVUM prior to that Sequoia Travel Management ROD. MVUM's are the end product of Travel Management plans. So how was the Piute MVUM created since the Piutes were removed from Travel Management? We continue to wait for a response from you to this question.

Steward's position on the PCT Corridor and the validity of the Piute MVUM have remained unchanged for five years. Why the sudden drastic measures by Ranger Al and without even

discussing it with Stewards?

We do not see how anybody pointing out an error with the Piute MVUM should result in the Forest Service prohibiting them from volunteering to perform much needed trail maintenance.

We do not understand why our volunteering to maintain trails somehow means the Forest Service can dictate our interpretation or comments on public forest planning process or the content of our website.

Our trail maintenance partnership does not require us to agree on all matters and to do so would be unethical. Please bear in mind that terminating our volunteer agreement will not stop Stewards of the Sequoia from continuing to question the validity of the Piute MVUM or opposing the PCT Corridor. That is our right as members of the public. The only result of terminating our agreement will be to drastically reduce volunteerism and thereby cause unnecessary harm to the trails, the environment and the public wellbeing.

As you may be aware Ranger AI would not renew Stewards volunteer agreement last year unless Stewards agreed to close trails and some other items unrelated to our trail work. We had to shut down Stewards volunteer program at the height of the season and were unable to perform most of the water bar work for the year as the soil dried up, since it took three months to convince him to renew the agreement without our being forced to close trails. This caused unnecessary environmental damage that Stewards would have prevented if allowed to volunteer.

Having to cancel Stewards volunteer trail appreciation events last year was also most discouraging to our volunteers. Many volunteers travel long distances to help on the Sequoia trails scheduling time away from their families and booking hotels. Many are not going to be coming back to volunteer again.

We are now faced with cancelling all Stewards spring trail appreciation events again, discouraging more volunteers, needlessly eliminating more than a thousand volunteer hours of needed trail work and causing degradation of the trails and the environment.

Stewards of the Sequoia have received numerous awards for our outstanding volunteer program including one from the Forest Chief. Stewards of the Sequoia are an undisputed incredible 15 year asset to the Sequoia National Forest performing almost 4000 miles of difficult remote trail maintenance including clearing 10,128 trees and maintaining 5220 water bars and hundreds of miles of brushing. Our members volunteer thousands of hours each year to benefit the public. It is most baffling to know that Ranger AI somehow feels we are not good partners with the Forest Service and has shut our trail maintenance program down, especially for seemingly minor issues totally unrelated to trail maintenance.

It is largely due to Stewards of the Sequoia volunteer efforts, that the Sequoia Kern River Ranger District has been ahead of the curve for reducing their backlog of trail maintenance for more than a decade, at no cost to the Forest Service. **How are you going to meet the National Trail Stewardship Act mandate to increase volunteerism by 100% by the end of next year if District Rangers are allowed to terminate the largest on the ground volunteer organization for no valid reason?**

Ranger AI and the Forest Service will be held responsible for the environmental damage that will be caused by his prohibiting Stewards from performing needed trail maintenance.

Successful volunteer programs are often the byproduct of advocacy organizations like Stewards of the Sequoia. As the Forest Service seeks more volunteers, they must also embrace the needs and desires of these volunteer organizations including questioning or opposing Forest Service proposals or actions. This should not cause the termination of volunteer agreements.

Stewards of the Sequoia have not violated any laws or forest regulations. Indeed we labor long and hard to help the Forest Service meet environmental standards and reduce maintenance backlog.

Stewards of the Sequoia trained and certified trail volunteers are ready, willing, and able as always to continue to maintain Sequoia trails we love per our trail adoption and volunteer agreement.

Will you reinstate Stewards of the Sequoia volunteer agreement so we can continue to help the Sequoia National Forest to reduce environmental trail impacts and comply with the National Trail Stewardship Act?

Sincerely,

Chris Horgan

Executive Director

Stewards of the Sequoia

chris@stewardsofthesequoia.org

"Since being founded in 2004, Stewards of the Sequoia continues to be the largest on-the-ground organization of volunteers in the Sequoia National Forest. Our crews have maintained over 4000 miles of trails and have planted hundreds of trees in reforestation projects. We represent in excess of 3200 members whose activities include motorized recreation, camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, boating, windsurfing, rock climbing and horse riding"

Promoting Responsible Recreation & Environmental Stewardship