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Steve Merlo: US Forest Service 'Gestapo' riles crowd at Isabella

By STEVE MERLO, Contributing outdoors columnist, smerlo@bak.rr.com | Thursday, Mar 26 2009 10:49 PM

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They came to lead the lambs to slaughter, but when the smoke cleared, the United States Forest Service found itself facing an angry pack of civilian wolves hellbent on tossing the governmental agency back into the woods. The 200-plus throng of concerned citizens first filled the Lake Isabella Senior Citizen hall last Monday evening, then overflowed into the foyers, each person wanting to make their point regarding government intrusion into their Kern River Valley livelihoods and recreational opportunities.

In a move that riled the normally laid-back local populace, the USFS has been proposing to shut off most vehicular access around Isabella Lake and the surrounding national forest mountains and substitute unpopular, mandated government plans to overtake these hunting, fishing, recreation and tourist attractions. The meeting, the supposed fifth in a series that went largely ignored until last Monday evening due to lack of proper USFS advertising, united the community to gather and repulse the direct threat against them.

There's no doubt that Tina Terrel, USFS supervisor for the Sequoia National Forest, has a tough job. Mandated to adopt one of five proposed Congressionally-approved plans that could possibly thwart local commerce, recreational opportunities and the jobs dependent on them, Ms. Terrel's position dictates she publicly allow discussion regarding them before implementation. That's a great policy, but, when the meetings become a grandstand show for USFS civilian-crushing, Gestapo-like power, rather than public input and information gathering, then she's overstepped her bounds.

Now she will argue that she did her job, but those in attendance will attest that her and her cronies' attitudes left nothing but a bad taste in the mouths of those attending. It seemed that her mind was already made up and that the maps and plans she brought with her were nothing more than a smokescreen designed to showcase the impending changes. It also seemed that she was merely going through the motions to appease the crowd.

One of the nice things about truth is that it usually surfaces without too much ado. This is exactly what happened when Ms. Terrel's maps and proposed changes were proven to be an outright and deliberate inaccuracy by several of the audience who happened to have their own legitimate map overlays directly contradicting the ones she and her staff displayed. Contact Chris@StewardsOfTheSequoia.org for proof.

This was not the supervisor's intentions, to provide falsehood, but she was under the direction of her "Region 5" chain of command superiors to use the flawed maps they provided her for her ammunition. That alone should raise the beacon of suspicion about her employers and let the condor out of the bag. (By the way, a part of the forest service's overall plan for Isabella and the surrounding area includes even more condor protection in an area that has not seen the prehistoric bird in decades.)

If Ms. Terrel finds for the government, instead of the people after the showing Monday night, it will be a gross miscarriage of justice for not only the Kern Valley populace but the people of the United States as well. And, in case anyone is really interested, the proposed plans will cost the taxpayers \$93 million to implement.

Anyway, big government is at it again and is trying to stifle more of our rights. The public has been asked to submit comments regarding the Route Designation Plan regarding vehicular road closures around the lake and surrounding areas until March 31. Contact : Chris Sanders, Assistant Recreation Officer; Sequoia National Forest; 1839 So. Newcomb Street; Porterville, CA 93257 to comment on the proposed changes.

Remember, public apathy regarding this cause will merely allow the USFS to close off access to the fishing, hunting and camping in the area on a permanent basis, and replace the old plan with a stricter, heavier- policed, high-fine, non-public-use right of ways.

One last thing, with turkey season set to open Saturday, one might also complain to the USFS about the lack of access to your forests. Most gates to public hunting areas are locked at this time and need to be reopened to address this hunter's issue. Don't be surprised when they write back and insist that the roads are open for most of the year. The truth is that they claim they don't have the manpower to open and close the gates, so they just keep 'em shut. Now that really irks me.

Hunter safety course offered

Kern Shooting Sports is offering another Hunter Safety Course on May 30 and 31. Call (661) 325-8725 for more information.

These are Steve Merlo's opinions, and not necessarily The Californian's. His column appears every Friday. Write him at merloworms- @bak.rr.com.



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