

THE VOTER

February 2026

Empowering Voters - Defending Democracy

In This Issue

President's Message	Page 1
Take Action	Page 2
Calendar of Events	Page 3
Voter Services	Page 4
Observer Corps	Page 5
Membership and WIGs	Page 6
Interest Groups	Page 7
National Convention Info	Page 8
LWVML Board Decisions	Page 9
Living with Fire Series Info	Pages 10-12

A Message from LWVML Presidential Triad —

Maria Benech, Jane Braga, and Leonides Russell

The new year had an ominous start. With the fatal shootings by federal agents in Minneapolis, the invasions by thousands of Homeland Security officers into American cities, and the seizure of 2020 voting records by the FBI, we are witnessing a crisis. Our democracy is in trouble. Our democracy is under siege.

In April of 2025, the LWVUS declared that the United States was entering a constitutional crisis. The foundational principles of our democracy – checks and balances, the rule of law, free and fair elections – were facing direct and sustained threats.

The events of this past January have shown that the threats continue. For over one hundred years, the mission of the League has been to Defend Democracy. To that end, the LWVUS recommends adoption by the 2026 Convention of a campaign, “Women Defend Democracy: Democracy Under Siege”, to empower the organization to act decisively to protect and defend our democracy.

The six prongs of the proposed program include: **Voting Rights, Election Protection, Redistricting, Individual Liberties, Immigration, and The Presidency.**

As a grassroots organization, the League is uniquely positioned to launch this defense by engaging and mobilizing voters nationwide. We operate locally, statewide, and nationally. Our mission has never been so important as it is today. We are reminded that “the sacred fire of liberty...” was “staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people,” as stated by George Washington in his first inaugural address.

“What can I do?” you may ask. Come, let your voice be heard at our February 7th General Membership Meeting. We will be adding our voices to those of other leagues across the country. We will discuss the proposed Program and vote so our League will have a voice at the National Convention in June. We will also review the positions of LWVUS to determine what we can use in our community for education, advocacy, and Action.

We need your input! We want to hear from all our members. Nationally, statewide, and locally, we have a lot of work to do. Over one hundred years ago, our founding mothers created this “mighty political experiment.” Let’s work together to continue our mission. Join us on Saturday, February 7th, to Defend Democracy!

Maria, Jane, and Leonides



Tell Congress Federal Immigration Enforcement Has Gone Too Far

For months, communities across the country, in Minnesota and beyond, have lived in terror as federal immigration enforcement agents have patrolled, surveilled, detained, disappeared, injured, and killed civilians, as well as denied people's constitutional rights by attacking and arresting peaceful protestors. Yet Congress — our elected officials — has played a pivotal role in funding and enabling this government-manufactured crisis, and they must act to stop these attacks.

We need you to stand with the League to demand that:

- **Senators reject additional funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), or immigration detention, and impose additional agency guardrails and accountability measures;**
- **Congress investigates ICE, CBP, and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS's) use of force; and Congress takes steps to protect civilians' constitutional rights to peacefully protest and assemble without their lives being threatened or taken.**

It is time for all of us to stand up, speak out, and demand an end to these heinous actions. No agency or elected official is above the law. Democracy cannot endure when its government uses violence to silence dissent and evade accountability. This [link](#) will take you to the LWV website for more information.

Tell Congress the Census Must Count All People

Last year, the House and Senate introduced the Equal Representation Act (H.R.151 and S.2205) to add a citizenship question to the 2030 Census and exclude noncitizens from the apportionment process, which determines the number of members each of our 50 states sends to the House of Representatives.

This bill is unconstitutional and violates the 14th Amendment, which requires the apportionment of the seats in the House of Representatives to be based on "the whole number of persons in each State" regardless of citizenship. Given that this bill seeks to change the constitutional mandate for the census, it would require a constitutional amendment, which Congress cannot do through mere legislation, as set forth in Article V of the Constitution.

The addition of a citizenship question is unnecessary and would lead to a less accurate census, which is not what our country needs. Census data is used to determine where billions of dollars of federal funding are shared with communities across the country, for things like roads and transit systems, schools, hospitals, veterans' care, disaster preparation, and many other important quality-of-life services. It is vital that these resources be funded proportionate to the whole number of persons in each community, as they are used by people regardless of citizenship status. An inaccurate census will only hurt Americans who need support in states and communities across the country.

Urge your Members of Congress to protect the census today!

Saturday, February 7th, 10 am to noon

General Meeting— Tuolumne County Library, 480 Greenley Road, Sonora

Please join us - we want and need to hear from you! Brenda McHenry and Jane Braga will lead us in a discussion on Program Planning. We'll discuss our League's capacity for what we're currently doing, what we ought to be doing, and what we might want to add to what we're doing...or not. We'll be talking about what's working, what's not working, and what else might be considered.

February and March Meetings/Events

Monday February 9th, 10:30 am

Homelessness Interest Group—Leonides Russell, Lead
Senior Center in Sonora

Tuesday February 10th, 4 pm

Fire Interest Group—Maria Benech, Lead
Karen Caldwell's Home

Wednesday February 11th, 1 pm to 2 pm

Membership — Patricia Horsthus Chair
Senior Center in Sonora

Monday February 16th, 1 pm to 3 pm

Voter Services — Susan Medeiros, Chair
Jane Braga's Home

Wednesday February 18th, 11:30 am

Water Interest Group—Jane Braga, Lead
Schnoogs

Friday February 20th, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm

Democracy Interest Group—Martha Rubin, Lead
Round Table Pizza in Angels Camp

Saturday February 21st, 1 pm to 3 pm

NEW MEMBER ORIENTATION

Sonora Main Library

Monday February 23rd, 11 am to 1 pm

LWVML Board
Senior Center in Sonora

Wednesday February 25th, 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm

Observer Corps —Jane Braga, Chair
Senior Center in Sonora

Saturday March 7th (14th & 21st) 9 am to 1pm

Living with Fire Series—This will be our
General Meeting for March. See pages 10—
12 for details.

Columbia College Dogwood Auditorium

Monday March 9th, 10:30 am

Homelessness Interest Group—Leonides Russell, Lead
Senior Center in Sonora

Tuesday March 10th, 4 pm

Fire Interest Group—Maria Benech, Lead
Karen Caldwell's Home

Wednesday March 11th, 1 pm to 2 pm

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Committees and Interest Groups, WHERE THE REAL WORK HAPPENS!

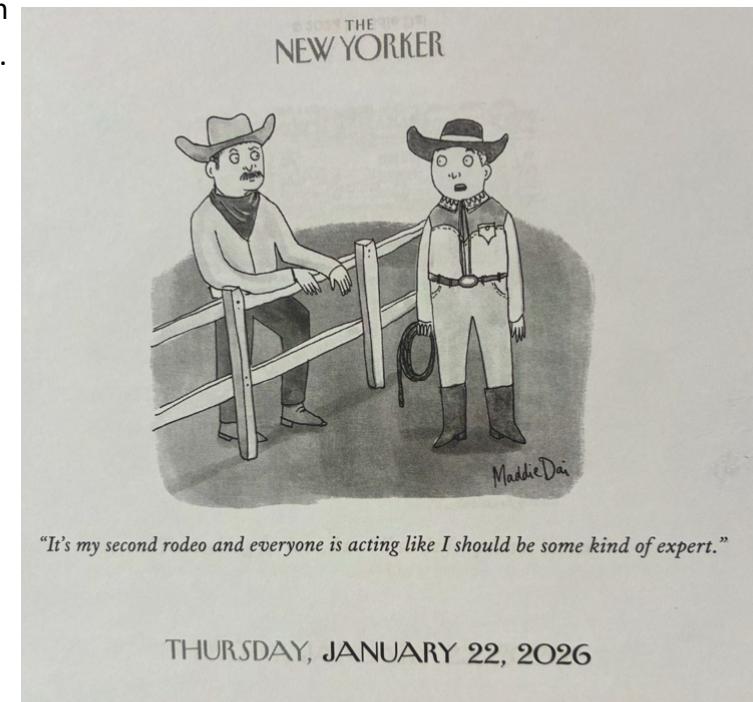
Voter Services Committee:

Committee Members: Leonides Russell, Pam Vlach, Maria Benech, Cris Barsanti, Jane Braga, and Susan Medeiros (Chair)

The Voter Services Committee met on Monday, January 21st. The following is a summary of the key activities discussed:

- Voter Services will provide information about our committee goals and activities at the New Members Orientation on February 21st. We are looking to recruit more members to participate in the upcoming election-related events.
- Pam Vlach and Leonides Russell will be presenting voter information to interested Calaveras County Jail inmates on February 26th.
- Vote 411, the League's online candidate information source, will be part of our activities for the upcoming Primary Election on June 2nd. Brenda McHenry is preparing to be the lead in Calaveras County. We are looking for a lead in Tuolumne County. This is very important, and we need to fill this job.
- Voter Services is beginning to prepare for the LWVML Candidate Forums. We are awaiting information on which candidates have filed for local races. The Declaration of Candidacy filing period is February 9 - March 6, 2026.
- We will prepare for presentations on the "Pros and Cons" of ballot measures when local and state information is made available.
- Leonides Russell and Maria Benech will be participating in a Zoom meeting to interview David Tangipa, our District 8 State Assemblyman, on state and legislative priorities on January 28th.
- We need to follow up with the Stanislaus County LWV to find out when the interview with our State Senator, Marie Alvarado-Gil, is happening.
- The Tuolumne County Volunteer Fair will be held on April 26th. We will participate and share information with the public and non-profit contacts regarding voter information. Help needed.

If you are interested in joining us, please contact Susan Medeiros at susancmedeiros@gmail.com or at (209) 840-2966.



Committees and Interest Groups continued:

Observer Corps (OC):

Committee Members: Leonides Russell, Susan Medeiros, Stefani Reichle, Maria Benech, Cris Barsanti, and Jane Braga (Chair)

Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors (BOS)

January 6th. Potential Brown Act violation with the election of the Board Chair. It was so well orchestrated. It gave the impression of talk behind the scenes between several members but, of course, can't be proved.

After a long, difficult, often contentious discussion, the board voted to close the Mono Vista fire station since it is not in operation 24/7. This is in response to the SAFER Grant running out mid year. Some board members, Griefer in particular, expressed surprise at the immediacy of the decision. In fact, the discussion has been ongoing for over a year. The CalFire chief explained that because of the union contract, employees have to be given adequate notice of layoffs. Further, the CalFire chief stated that if there were any further station closures CalFire could no longer serve the county. It would not be safe for his people.

Supervisor Griefer stated that he could not support Supervisor Campbell, who has been Vice Chair in 2025, as chair because he is running for re-election. Campbell's nomination had already been moved and seconded. Griefer then nominated himself as chair. An unpleasant discussion ensued. With a vote of 3-2 (Campbell and Brandon dissenting) Griefer was elected chair. This vote was taken before the previous motion. Holland was voted Vice Chair.

January 13th. No report. Information. Chair Griefer had placed 'Ceremonial Swearing in of Elected Officials for the County of Tuolumne for 2026' on the agenda. This was confusing since all elected officials were officially sworn in after the election. The item was removed from the agenda.

January 27th. No report. Information. The Board extended the time period for relocation of RVs from Camp Justice for 60 days. No more extensions.

Sonora City Council

January 5th. The Council received updates on parking lot project repairs - Stewart Street parking lot (\$510k with \$155k shortfall), Lyons and Stewart Street parking lots (\$650k), and the Farmers Market sidewalk enhancement project.

January 20th. Police Chief Turu gave his Annual Statistical Summary Report. 13,000 incidents in 2025. 3,800 calls to 911. 87 felony arrests. 251 misdemeanor arrests.

There was a public hearing on the rates for Cal Waste, the new waste removal company for the city. This hearing was per Proposition 218 mandates. Two citizens charged that the city had not been transparent and had violated Prop 218. Mayor Segerstrom pointed out the timeline followed, as directed by Prop 218. The city was not in violation. This Observer has been at a number of the meetings. OC can concur with the Mayor.

Tuolumne Utility District (TUD)

January 13th. No report.

January 27th. General Manager Perkins presented 2025 Year in Review, a video of all the accomplishments of 2025. They got a lot accomplished! Viewers received bags of popcorn to accompany the film!

All are welcome to attend our meetings and join in on the fun. Contact Jane Braga at 209-768-3842 or jbraga49@gmail.com for more information.

Committees and Interest Groups continued:

Membership Committee:

Committee Members: Maureen Kelley, Augusta Parrington, Vivian Griswold, Cris Barsanti, Jeff Klay, Maria Benech and Patricia Horsthus (Chair)

New Member Orientation

On Saturday, February 21st, LWVML will have a New Member Orientation at the Sonora Library from 1 pm to 3 pm. We have not put one of these on since before COVID, so the definition of “new member” is broad. Even if you’ve been with us for years, but have not attended one of these sessions, we encourage you to join us.

Several Board members will present information on our local League as well as the national and state organizations. This is a great opportunity to ask questions and learn about all that LWV, LWVC, and LWVML have to offer. We will be discussing how the League of Voters works as a non-partisan political organization and the many facets of the issues we work on. You can also get to know other League members. We will be providing lots of information on how to learn more if you are interested, and lots of reference materials. Snacks will be provided.

Please RSVP to Patricia Horsthus at phorsthus@yahoo.com.

Water Interest Group (WIG)

Members: Patricia Horsthus, Leonides Russell, Suzanne Hennessy, Jeff Hollis, Tom Parrington, and Jane Braga (Lead)

It's January, and it's time to gear back up! WIGs are planning some more field trips for our League. The Big One will be a Springtime return to Ackerson Meadow. Stay tuned for more information!

A water question was submitted to Assemblyman David Tangipa through our Legislative Interview representatives, Leonides Russell and Maria Benech. Unfortunately, the interview didn't really happen; the Assemblyman was not available even though he had set the date and time, and his Legislative Director was unable to answer most of our questions. Our question was asking for clarification about his 'urgent message' released earlier in January, calling on the governor to 'immediately provide full water allocations to our farmers.' We felt this may be a bit premature, considering that no rain has occurred since early January, and none is forecast for the next 10 days. We were disappointed, but our question was submitted to his office, and we are looking forward to his response.

Update! WIG meeting times have changed from the fourth Wednesday to the THIRD Wednesday. Still at Schnoogs and still at 11:30.

Homelessness Interest Group (HIG)

Members: Ted Michaud, Patricia Horstius, Trudy Craig, Suzanne Hennessy, Cindy Roberts, and Leonides Russell (Lead)

LWVML member and Homelessness advocate, Jeff Klay, will be talking to the HIGs at our next meeting. Jeff spearheads breakfast at Camp Justice once a month and is very active in the Social Justice Group at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Our next meeting is Monday, February 9th at the Senior Center in Sonora at 10:30.

Democracy (in action) Interest Group (DIG)

Members: Tia Andersen, Janis Ossa, Brenda McHenry, Trudy Craig, Irene Wetzel, Susan Medeiros, Karen Caldwell, Maria Benech, Jane Braga, Leonides Russell, and Martha Rubin (Lead)

DIG met on January 16th at the Round Table Pizza in Angels Camp. We worked from an outline of the SAVE ACT (Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act) that provided information regarding who would be affected by the SAVE Act and the impact it would bring.

This will be condensed and rewritten in the form of a fact sheet, brochure, or poster to be distributed to the community so that they can understand the true meaning of the act.

We are also writing different scenarios, which will provide better insight into the impacts on individuals.

Meetings will be held on the 3rd Friday of the month, at Angels Camp Round Table Pizza at 1:30. The next meeting is on February 20th. For more information, contact Martha Rubin at 650-619-7136 or email rubinmartha@gmail.com

Fire Interest Group (FIG)

Members: Karen Caldwell, Martha Rubin, Maureen Kelley, Stefani Reichle, Elsie Bruno, Deborah Rei, Patricia Dunlap, Lynn McCormick, and Maria Benech (Lead)

Our three-day "Living with Fire" series is almost here! The series will run the first three Saturdays of March (the 7th, 14th, and 21st) and is free to all. We hope you'll join us for one or more of the dates. LWVML will not have a March General Meeting; we hope you will attend the March 7th session at Columbia College from 9 am to 1 pm.

The LWVML FIG has partnered with the Tuolumne Fire Safe Council (TFSC) to sponsor this event. The goal is to educate residents on the increasing risk of wildfires to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources. Each day will build on the story of Wildfire in our Counties and how we can learn to live with fire while reducing risk to life and property. Each session can also stand on its own. The event will feature films, speakers, panel discussions, and audience participation activities.

Our agenda is not totally complete, but very close. March 7th will begin with the film, "The West is Burning," followed by a panel discussion on Resilient Landscapes, Fire Adapted Communities, Collaborative Forest Management, and Communities & Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Lastly, Dr. Tom Hofstra will take us on a tour of the Columbia College Campus to see the fuel reduction work his students have done over the past several years to create a more fire-resilient landscape. Check out the flyer and daily agenda on pages 10–12, and get updated information [HERE](#).

Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 10th, at 4 pm at Karen Caldwell's home.



Save the Date—The 57th Biennial League of Women Voters National Convention will take place from June 26 to 28, 2026! Join us in Columbus, Ohio, or virtually, for this powerful multi-day event.

The National Convention is a League experience unlike any other, as delegates representing state and local Leagues vote on the LWVUS Board of Directors, the Nominating Committee, bylaws amendments, the budget, and League priorities. In addition to plenary sessions, the Convention also includes dynamic presentations, practical trainings, and inspiring content that supports our mission of empowering voters and defending democracy. For more information go to <https://www.lvv.org/events/council-convention>.

For the first time, LWVML will be sending our very own delegates to the National Convention. Jane Braga, Co-President, and Karen Caldwell, Vice President, were chosen as our two representatives. Our President and one delegate each get a vote. All League members are welcome and encouraged to attend.

The State Convention will be held in 2027 (they rotate every other year with the National Convention), and we hope to have many more representatives at that one since it will be closer to home.

How You Can Renew/Join

Renew/join today online at [LWVML.org](https://www.lwvml.org). Your dues support national, state, and local League efforts. When you go to the website, you will see the “Join” button in the top right corner of your screen. Remember to identify our local league, League of Women Voters of the Mother Lode. This ensures you remain on our mailing list, or if you are a new member, you will receive our monthly newsletter and other important messages (not too many, though).

LWVML is a 501(c)3 organization, and all donations are tax-deductible—tax ID #873922182. LWVML receives only \$15 of the \$75 from National dues. This part is tax-deductible, but the remaining \$60 is not. LWV and LWVC activities include political lobbying and advocacy, which disqualifies donations from being considered as charitable donations.

January LWVML Board Decisions

- ◆ The Board liked the new Treasurer's Report format. The spreadsheet is informative, but the written reports are more current and easier to read.
- ◆ Candidate Forums will be held the week of April 27th. We will reach out to the LWV of Stanislaus County regarding the State Senate seat. Several people are now running for this seat.
- ◆ The Board pledged \$500 for the "Living with Fire" series the FIGs are working on with the Tuolumne Fire Safe Council. Money is primarily for advertising, snacks, per diem, and lodging of speakers.
- ◆ Budget Committee. Maria Benech and Suzanne Hennessy are on it. We will ask for volunteers at the February General Meeting.
- ◆ LWVML will send Jane Braga and Karen Caldwell to the National Convention in Ohio in June. This is in our budget. This is very exciting as it will be our first time attending the National Convention and voting.
- ◆ The Board approved Suzanne Hennessy's appointment to the Nominating Committee in Deborah Rei's absence.
- ◆ Girls State attendees speak at a General Meeting. Is this something done in Tuolumne County? Could our League sponsor them if not?
- ◆ We will have a table at the Tuolumne County Volunteer Faire on April 23rd.
- ◆ Our new banner (right) has been ordered. Karen Caldwell did an excellent job on it.



League Cheer

Do you know another member who is:

- Ill or suffered the loss of a loved one;
- Celebrating an important accomplishment?

Call or text Augusta Parrington at 209-770-0211 or email her at aparrington13@gmail.com to ask her to send out a Care Card.

LWVML 2025/2026 BOARD OFFICERS:

Presidential Triad — **Maria Benech, Jane Braga, and Leonides Russell**
 Vice President - **Karen Caldwell**
 Treasurer — **Suzanne Hennessy**
 Recording Secretary — **Janis Ossa**
 Program Director—**Brenda McHenry**

Action Director—**Leonides Russell**
 Publicity Director - **Stefani Reichle**
 The Voter Editor—**Maria Benech**
 Membership Director - **Patricia Horsthuis**
 Voter Services Director—**Susan Medeiros**
 Observer Corp Director - **Jane Braga**
 Fundraising Director—**Deborah Rei**

LWVML 2025/2026 Non-Board Positions: Corresponding Secretary — **Dorene Hensler**; Nominating Committee Chair - **Leslie Klay**; Nominating Committee Members - **Maureen Kelley** and **Charlene Dambacher**; Greeters — **Cris Barsanti and Jeff Klay**; Webmaster—**Dorene Hensler**

The League of Women Voters of the Mother Lode is a tax exempt organization as described in Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code: Tax ID #87-3922182.

Join us for a **FREE** special event series.

LIVING WITH FIRE

Learn to live with fire and reduce potential losses from wildfires.

Films, speakers, panel discussions, and audience participation activities!

Session 1: Fire Risk – How did we get here? What now?

Saturday, March 7, 9am-1pm,

Location: Columbia College, Dogwood Forum Building

Session 2: Reducing Risk and Building Resilience

Saturday, March 14, 9am-1pm

Location: Black Oak Casino Resort Conference Center

Session 3: Community Prevention & Individual Responsibility

Saturday, March 21, 9am-1pm

Location: Black Oak Casino Resort Conference Center

For more
information
tuolumnefiresafe.org



Come to one, two, or all three sessions.
No registration required.



Join us for a **FREE** special event series.

LIVING WITH FIRE

**Learn to live with fire and reduce
potential losses from wildfires.**

The Tuolumne Fire Safe Council and the League of Women Voters of the Mother Lode have partnered together to sponsor an event focused on educating residents on the increasing risk of wildfire to our homes, businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Objective: To educate residents on the increasing risk of wildfire threat to our homes, businesses, infrastructure, and natural resources of Tuolumne County. To improve knowledge and understanding of the many factors that influence wildfire behavior and how we can learn to live with wildfire through adaptation and participation of all.

Through the generous support of the Columbia College Foundation and Black Oak Casino Resort the Living with Fire Series has become a reality.

The event will be **FREE** and open to all.

When: March 7, 14, 21, 2026 (Saturdays), 3 sessions will build on each other or stand alone.

Session 1: Fire Risk – How did we get here? Where are we now?

Saturday, March 7, 9:00 am to 1:00 pm
Columbia College – Dogwood Forum Building
11600 College Dr, Sonora, CA 95370

Film: “The West is Burning”

THE WEST IS BURNING raises awareness about the conditions of forests in the western U.S. This feature documentary released in November 2020 examines the history of forest management and litigation that led to the current conditions which are causing catastrophic fire nearly year-round. The film explores the urgent need to act now, and the potential to generate positive change in our forests, watersheds, and communities, both rural and urban. Six real life perspectives drive the film’s narrative to help raise awareness about the conditions of forests in the western U.S. Their stories demonstrate the need to embrace a new

Continued from page 11

era of forest stewardship, and the unique partnerships that are being built across community-based organizations, government entities, and private and non-governmental organizations. These thought leaders highlight the need for a unified response to climate change, land use, and forest restoration, and emphasize the importance of community-based solutions to these challenges.

Discussion Panel

A FORMAL PANEL DISCUSSION featuring local leaders in fire, land management, private lands, forest resource utilization, collaboration and partnerships, education, and government will explore the themes of Resilient Landscapes, Fire Adapted Communities, Collaborative Forest Management, Communities and the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Fuel Reduction Tour

[Dr. Thomas Hofstra](#), Professor of Forestry and Natural Resources at Columbia College, will guide us on a walk through the Columbia College Campus to view active fuel reduction work being done by Forestry and Natural Resources students, including hand thinning, pile burning, chipping, mastication and broadcast burning. (Please wear appropriate footwear.)

Difficulty: Moderate, the campus is hilly. We will stay on trails and fire roads as much as possible. Access to some units may require off trail walking. Limited accessibility options may be available. Please notify the welcome table of any special needs.

Session 2: Reducing Risk and Building Resilience

Saturday, March 14, 9 am-1 pm
Black Oak Casino Conference Center

More details to come, but all speakers and films are confirmed. This day will include the short film “Fireforest” and a discussion of the Tuolumne County Community Protection Plan (CWPP). It will also include the successful local collaborative group, Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS), and the SERAL Project, as well as breakout sessions with interactive presentations on Wildfire Preparedness, Fire Insurance, and Research on Home Loss in the Camp Fire.

Session 3: Community Prevention and Individual Responsibility

Saturday, March 21, 9 am-1 pm
Black Oak Casino Conference Center

More details to come, but the day will include the film “Weathered: Inside the LA Firestorm” as well as multiple speakers and small group discussions. Topics include home hardening, good fire on the landscape, and the health impacts of wildfire smoke.