

Expansion of the Yuki Wilderness through land donation under 6(a) of the Wilderness Act.

When the owner of the Sanhedrin Ranch, an area of private land within the Mendocino National Forest, decided to sell the ranch in 2015, and indicated interest in selling it to the Forest Service, the FS was interested in acquisition and requested funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The property contains portions of Sanhedrin Creek and Elk Creek, both tributaries to the Middle Fork Eel River. The Middle Fork Eel River provides for 1/3 to 1/2 of California's summer-run steelhead trout population. The property is also adjacent to the Yuki Wilderness.

The FS contacted the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) for assistance in acquiring the property. They were unsuccessful in receiving LWCF funding. In 2018 the TPL acquired 3,000 acres of the Sanhedrin Ranch with the proposal of donating it under Section 6(a) of the Wilderness Act as an addition to the Yuki Wilderness. The Mendocino National Forest was open to the donation if the land was suitable for management as wilderness.

TPL contracted with CalWild to conduct a Wilderness Compatibility Evaluation to determine if the 3,000 acres could be managed as wilderness under the Wilderness Act. CalWild consulted with the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training center for technical guidance, and requested a review of the draft report. The Sanhedrin Ranch had been roaded in the 1970s and 1980s for logging, and converted to a tree plantations. On the 3,000 acer parcel, those plantations subsequently burned and were replaced by chaparral. Though the roads had been closed, 70 culverts and two small bridges remained.

Regrowth of the logged area on the parcel was composed of stumps concealed by shrubs and small trees. Though there was a loss of older trees, plant composition was not a significant departure from natural, and there were no invasive species documented. Islands of non-disturbed land existed in riparian and forest areas in canyon bottoms, oak woodlands, chaparral, and grasslands. Approximately 16 miles of roads were naturally revegetating and many nearly completely overgrown. There were no conditions identified that would require investment in active restoration. Approximately 15 sensitive species occur in the region, and the parcel is expected to provide habitat for some of them.

No mining operations had occurred on the property and the mineral estate was held by the surface owner, and would be conveyed. Two small unimproved inholdings with no recorded rights of access are surrounded by the tract. Seven miles of the old roads were determined to be suitable for future management as hiking and horseback riding trails (there were no trails in the existing Yuki Wilderness).

The conclusion reached in the Wilderness Compatibility Evaluation was that the property could be managed as wilderness. There is a history of areas once logged being designated as wilderness (especially in the east) allowing those areas to naturally rehabilitate over time. There were no circumstances identified on this property which would require a different approach. The Mendocino National Forest was, however, concerned that the 70 culverts presented a hazard of blow out, and asked that the culverts be removed and drainages restored before accepting the donation.

In 2019, the Mendocino National Forest accepted the 3,000 acre tract from the TPL as a donation under Section 6(a) of the Wilderness Act, to be added to the Yuki Wilderness.