

Background

Over the past few years, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has been actively involved in issues relating to forest and community health. The Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI) was adopted by the Board in 2011 and was endorsed by all 22 Sierra counties, as well as numerous other groups and organizations. The Initiative called for parties to work together in a collaborative manner with the objectives of restoring forests to ecological health and improving local communities' social and economic well-being.

As a part of SNFCI, the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council was formed under SNC's leadership. Representatives on the Coordinating Council include a wide range of diverse perspectives including local government, environmental and conservation organizations, the wood products industry, fire safe councils, community organizations, recreational groups and public land management agencies. Boardmember Kirkwood serves as the Board Liaison to the Coordinating Council.

At the same time, a number of local collaborative efforts with objectives consistent with the Initiative have begun in the Region. The SNC has provided substantial financial and staff support to many of these collaboratives and was instrumental in the creation of a number of them.

Shortly after this initiative began, the U.S. Forest Service Region 5 released its "Leadership Intent for Ecological Restoration" which articulated the need to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration. This document is consistent with the Initiative and has helped to further bring parties together on the many challenges that we face in achieving our objectives.

At the June 2014 Board meeting, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures that the issues being addressed under the SNFC Initiative were the organization's top priority. In response to this direction, staff prepared the "State of Sierra Forests" report, which represents our best understanding of current conditions at this time. The Board approved this report for distribution at the September Board meeting, noting that the report may be updated from time to time as new information becomes available or circumstances change.

For the September Board meeting, SNC staff also developed a draft SNFCI Action Plan, which addresses issues at the Regional level as well as developing a plan at the watershed/county/National Forest level. The Board approved the Draft SNFCI Action Plan at the September meeting and instructed SNC staff to move forward with further development of a more detailed iteration of the SNFCI Action Plan for the Board's consideration at the December meeting.

While the pace and scale of work continues to lag well behind what is needed, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of positive developments in the efforts to restore our forests to ecological health. In carrying out the Board's direction, the SNC will enhance and build upon these efforts, as well as identifying more ways for

the organization to increase pace and scale. An example of the activities occurring include:

- SNC's continuing involvement on a number of fronts in an effort to increase the utilization of biomass removed as part of forest restoration;
- SNC's ongoing support of local collaborative efforts; and,
- The work of the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council in their five focus areas:
 - Addressing Restoration at a Larger Landscape Level
 - Increased Use of Prescribed and Managed Fire
 - Protecting and Increasing Wood/Biomass Processing Infrastructure
 - Ensuring Local Socio-Economic Benefits from Restoration Efforts
 - Potential for Restoration Treatment on Steep Slopes

Current Status

The additional emphasis on these issues occurs recognizing that the conditions faced in the Region are growing even more critical and require a response with a high degree of urgency. The "State of the Sierra Forests" report was released in September and has been widely distributed throughout the Region and among policymakers and media. This report raised the alarm about the urgent need to return our Sierra Nevada forests and watersheds to a state of resiliency. Staff is proposing to provide the roadmap to this future resiliency through the SNFCI Action Plan (Attachment A), which identifies the actions that the SNC will organize and coordinate with a wide array of partners.

While the primary focus of our efforts will continue to be federally managed forests, watershed level efforts will take a more holistic "all lands" perspective. The truism that "fire respects no boundaries" emphasizes the need to consider forest condition and potential actions regardless of ownership (and reinforces the need to engage CalFire and private landowners in our efforts). Large fires such as the Rim Fire and King Fire not only pose threats to communities and resources, the expense of fire suppression often results in reducing funds available for restoration efforts. In addition, the flow of salvaged logs from these fires can easily meet or exceed mill capacity in the Region, once again resulting in restoration projects with a log component becoming infeasible. We find ourselves in a cycle that causes us to fall further behind in needed restoration work, making a bad situation even worse. All indications suggest that the changing climate (and the current drought) will result in a longer fire season, with more large intense fires into the future.

Further, staff is recommending the development of a Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (Sierra Nevada WIP), using the SNFCI Action Plan as the centerpiece. While the SNFCI efforts will continue to focus on the forest/fire/community issues, there is a need to develop a more comprehensive approach to watershed health to ensure that aquatic, meadow and habitat resources are protected and restored. The Sierra Nevada WIP, loosely modeled after the successful Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program, will engage other partners, agencies and stakeholders in an integrated and holistic approach to watershed health issues. The experience in Tahoe

has shown that a well-articulated program with clear objectives and specific projects can be very successful in drawing investment and support.

The Sierra Nevada WIP will build on the SNFCI Action Plan's efforts to achieve the following key objectives:

- Quantification of the specific projects/activities needed to restore Sierra Nevada forests and watersheds to a state of resilience and the cost of their implementation. This includes factors beyond the natural landscape, such as wood and biomass processing infrastructure capacity and local capacity for collaboration.
- Increase in state and federal investment in forest and watershed restoration activities, as well as securing investment from downstream beneficiaries.
- Address state and federal policy issues that will remove impediments and increase the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration.

Through the development of the Sierra Nevada WIP, SNC will continue to operate in a collaborative manner, interacting with the wide range of stakeholders involved with these issues. We will build on the consensus that exists on the need to act to increase pace and scale of restoration and the efforts that are currently underway to address this problem.

Next Steps

SNC staff will continue to share the "State of Sierra Forests" report with the public, as well as engage our partners in sharing the report as widely as possible. This report will be utilized as a companion piece to our SNFCI Action Plan and in development of the Sierra Nevada WIP to help make the case for increased investment in the Sierra Nevada. As noted above, the SNC may update this report from time to time to add new information or address emerging issues.

Upon approval by the Governing Board, SNC staff will begin development of the Sierra Nevada WIP, with the SNFCI Action Plan as the centerpiece. The first steps will be the development of a more detailed work plan to guide our efforts, initial gathering and analysis of relevant information and engaging partners in the development of a draft Sierra Nevada WIP at both the regional and local levels.

It is anticipated that an initial draft Sierra Nevada WIP, as well as some pilot watershed level WIP assessments, will be brought to the Board at the March, 2015 meeting. This rollout of the Regional Sierra Nevada WIP will coincide with the SNC's 10 year celebration, and possible additional events may include a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signing with key partners and a potential Sierra Watersheds Summit.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board approve the SNFCI Action Plan and authorize staff to continue with its implementation, including the development of a Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program.