

Background

For more than six 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. It 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. The SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council (Coordinating Council) continues to represent 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. They are unified by the common goals of increasing the pace and scale of restoration of the Sierra Nevada's forests and building healthier ecosystems, economies and communities in the Sierra Nevada. The various forest collaboratives on the ground are also continuing their work to carry out this same mission on the ground in specific watersheds and communities.

At the June 2014 Board meeting, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures that the issues being addressed under SNFCI were the organization's top priority. In response to this direction, the [State of Sierra Nevada's Forests Report](#), which represents our best understanding of current forest conditions and potential consequences at this time, was developed by staff, and approved by the Board at the September 2014 Board meeting.

Recognizing that a more holistic approach to watershed health in the Sierra was needed, SNC staff worked closely with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Region 5 in the development of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP). The WIP is a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes, including the actions identified in the SNFCI Action Plan and expanding upon them to include a variety of other watershed health issues. The WIP was officially launched in March of this year, with the Board approving a [Plan](#) to guide development of the WIP. The USFS also co-hosted the March 4 Summit with the SNC, which was a critical step in engaging our key partners in the WIP. They have been fully engaged in developing this plan, and have indicated that all of the National Forests in the Sierra Nevada will be active participants in the WIP.

The WIP will enhance and build upon our ongoing efforts to restore Sierra watersheds and forests to ecological health. By identifying and quantifying the need for, and cost of, restoration at the watershed level, as well as the impediments to taking such action, we will create a clearer roadmap for moving forward. Engaging other state and federal agencies who support restoration activities will ensure a more strategic and effective approach. The program will also provide critical information for policy makers and "downstream beneficiaries" to consider their role in this restoration effort. At the same time, building on existing collaborative efforts ensures that key interested parties are

engaged in the assessment process and in project development and implementation, and that ongoing efforts will be enhanced.

Current Status

Since the June board meeting, SNC staff has been focused on developing the partner relationships required to implement the WIP, and developing the template for approaching implementation of the WIP at the watershed level in lands across a variety of ownership. Staff has been building on the momentum and interest generated at the March Summit with follow up conversations and meeting with our participants to identify opportunities to leverage our efforts to further our shared objectives under the WIP. Staff also continues to engage new partners in this effort, many of whom are approaching us asking for ways to support the WIP after participating in the Summit, or reading about it through one of the many news outlets that ran the story. Boardmembers Kirkwood and Giacomini continue to serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the effort.

In late June, staff worked with the U.S. Forest Service and California Natural Resources Agency to have a portion of the Sierra Nevada Region included in [the designation of the California Headwaters as a Resilient Lands and Waters Region](#). President Obama's Priority Agenda for Enhancing the Climate Resilience of America's Natural Resources (released in October 2014) called for the identification of place-based, landscape-scale resilience strategies. While this designation didn't result in new funding for the Region, it did shine a light on the importance of the Sierra to California, and supported the work we strive to accomplish through the WIP. These two efforts will be closely coordinated, as the regional planning work occurring through the WIP will feed into the report required by the Resilient Lands and Waters designation which will identify an initial list of priority areas for conservation, restoration, or other investments, to build resilience in vulnerable regions, enhance carbon storage capacity, and support management needs. Additional information on the CA Headwaters Region and the Resilient Lands & Waters Initiative can be found in the Regional Policy and Outreach Report.

Here are some of the key outcomes of the WIP over the last three months:

WIP Regional Strategy Development

- While the SNC has delved deeply into the forest health issues aspects of the WIP, the scope of this effort is much larger, covering a wide array of watershed health concerns. Staff is currently engaging our partners in identifying and describing these other aspects of the WIP through the development of the WIP Regional Strategy.
- The Regional Strategy will identify and incorporate key objectives from various State plans, policies, etc., such as the CA Water Action Plan, Safeguarding CA, and the CA Wildlife Action Plan.
- The WIP Regional Strategy will include key information, trends, and data for each major category, which will include Water, Fire, Habitat/Biodiversity, GHG/Carbon

Sequestration, and Recreation/Tourism. There will also be common threads throughout all categories, such as strategies to build climate change resilience.

- The WIP Regional Strategy will also describe in detail the process and timeline through which the WIP will be implemented at the watershed level. (More details about this can be found in the Restoration Implementation section later in this report.)
- Staff anticipates having a draft version of the Strategy completed by the end of September 2015, and a final draft by our December 2015 SNC board meeting.

Policy

- The SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council is planning a special field-based meeting in October to focus on identifying new models for overcoming the challenge of the lack of wood processing infrastructure in the Sierra Nevada. This meeting will include a wider group of people working to address this issue across a wide variety of approaches.
- Staff and partners are engaging in the process of updating the three-year Cap and Trade auction revenue investment plan. An initial draft was released in late July, with plans for the plan to be completed in late fall.
- Staff continues to be active participants in the Forest Climate Action Team. This group is charged with identifying a better understanding of the role forests play in assisting in efforts to address climate change and determine the best strategies to pursue in that regard.
- SNC Staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 met with Secretary John Laird and California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) staff in July, resulting in a potential Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalizing the relationship between CNRA and USFS Region 5 and their support of and roles in the WIP.
- In July, SNC Staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 also met with CAL FIRE to discuss the issues associated with the implementation of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds (GGRF) grant program.
- The same group also met with the California Air Resources Board and CalEPA, to discuss a variety of climate related issues. There will continue to be efforts to better understand the role forests play in storing carbon, the effects of a variety of forest health activities and the consequences of large, damaging fires.
- SNC staff also identified policy action targets and objectives for the WIP, which are now being honed and finalized for inclusion in the WIP Regional Strategy and the SNC Strategic Plan.

Funding

The WIP Funding Team has made progress towards a number of WIP objectives, including:

- Launching the SNC Proposition 1 Grant program.

- Developing and starting to use a funding investment tracking tool for the Region. Funding Team members have been researching and recording data in the tool to track WIP-related investments in the Sierra Nevada Region from federal, state, local, and nonprofit sources.
- Publishing several Funding Research Memos to SNC website providing valuable information about current funding opportunities.
- Publishing and sharing a monthly newsletter with partners highlighting funding opportunities.
- Convening meetings and facilitating introductions between regional partners and potential funders.
- Providing technical assistance to regional partners in developing grant applications to multiple sources.
- Completing a draft concept paper to help guide activities during the next 18 months, which will be integrated into the WIP Regional Strategy and the SNC Strategic Plan.

Communications

- The WIP Communications Team worked to finalize a communications strategy for the WIP, identifying opportunities to coordinate outreach with partners and possible products that could be used to connect with policy makers.
- SNC and the USFS also developed a joint “virtual billboard” campaign on social media that focused on the importance of increasing the pace and scale of restoration in the Sierra Nevada. This campaign provided viewers with two comparison photos – one depicting the desired look of Sierra forests and watersheds, and the other showing Sierra forests and watersheds after large, damaging fire events. The caption “You Choose” was included on all billboards to indicate that we have the ability to alter the current trends. (These virtual billboards will be shown as part of the Regional Policy and Outreach portion of the board meeting.)
- A logo was developed for the WIP and work to brand the WIP has started. (This will be shown as part of the Regional Policy and Outreach portion of the SNC Board meeting).

Restoration Implementation

- The SNC is coordinating with USFS Region 5 and the Tahoe National Forest, who are making final refinements to the watershed assessment approach at the forest level, which will eventually be rolled out on the USFS lands throughout the Region. There is agreement between the SNC and the USFS that these watershed assessments must be closely coordinated with the forest plan revision process, to ensure adequate capacity, as well as utility, at the forest level.
- The BLM’s Mother Lode Field Office is currently developing a pilot assessment on their lands, which will complement the assessment that has been done on the

Tahoe National Forest. A template will be developed based on this pilot that will then be developed by the other BLM field offices throughout the Sierra Nevada Region as part of the WIP. SNC is also in conversation with National Park Service leadership in order to determine the best ways to engage them in the WIP as well.

- The Placer Resource Conservation District, through the Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC) Joint Powers Authority (JPA), has begun work on the pilot data collection process at the watershed level in the area overlapping the Tahoe National Forest and BLM Mother Lode Field Office assessments, which will give us a well-rounded view of this watershed area. Once the JPA data collection process has been grounded through this pilot (end of September 2015), this data assessment work will be launched throughout the Sierra Nevada. We anticipate this first phase of the watershed level assessment being completed by the end of this year.
- The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), USFS Region 5, and SNC are also exploring the possibility of a detailed watershed level analysis, including project identification, on a watershed in the Tahoe National Forest, which if successful could attract new streams of funding to that watershed.

Next Steps

Staff will continue further development and implementation of the WIP, focusing efforts on the four key areas of Policy, Funding, Communications, and Restoration Implementation. Efforts continue to deepen on the forest/fire/community issues, but through the development of the WIP Regional Strategy, we are now engaging our partners in developing a more comprehensive approach to watershed health to ensure that aquatic, meadow, habitat, and recreational resources are protected and restored.

Staff is also working with USFS Region 5 to present a WIP Partner Briefing Webinar in early October. Staff will be working with key partners to identify new potential partners to engage with the WIP. The webinar will include an overview of the WIP, a high-level review of the WIP Regional Strategy, and opportunities through which interested parties can engage with the WIP, at both the Regional and watershed levels.

Staff will provide regular updates to the Board as to progress in the development and implementation of the WIP.

Recommendation

This is an informational item only; no formal action is needed by the Board at this time, although Boardmembers are encouraged to share their thoughts and comments.