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Planning begins on projects funded by \$70M grant

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A plan is now in place for completing \$70 million worth of projects in Tuolumne County related to forest restoration, watershed health and community resilience, through a federal grant the state received last year.

Louise Bedsworth, of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, explained at the May 2 meeting that Tuolumne County was selected by the state as the focus of its application because of the 400-square-mile Rim Fire in 2013, most of which burned in the county.

State and county officials "kicked off" the process earlier this month during a meeting with the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors, where they presented timelines for completing all of the projects by 2022.

The money comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's first-ever National Disaster Resilience Competition, an offshoot of the federal Community Development Block Grant Program.

"We decided use this as an opportunity to think about building rural resilience and economic development to address issues of wildfire and drought, which are current issues for us that we know are going to worsen with changing climate conditions," Bedsworth said.

States throughout the United States that experienced major disasters between 2011 and 2013 were eligible to participate in the competition for \$1 billion in federal funding for projects that will improve future resiliency to events such as wildfires, hurricanes and floods.

Another goal is to create program that can be replicated in other rural communities throughout California.

The state applied for \$117 million and received \$70 million in June 2016, which includes \$28 million for forest and watershed recovery projects in areas burned by the Rim Fire, \$22 million for construction of a facility to convert forest biomass into energy and wood products, and \$20 million to build at least one "community resilience center" in the county.

Forest and watershed recovery projects will include biomass removal, noxious weed treatment, tree planting, reconstruction of rangeland infrastructure, and the construction or expansion of strategic fire breaks.

The recovery projects and construction of the facility to process biomass removed from the forest will be overseen by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency created to promote the economic and social well-being of the Sierra Nevada region.

Supervisors at the May 2 meeting asked officials from the conservancy to incorporate solid-waste processing in the design of the biomass facility.

At the same meeting, the board also entered into an agreement with the state Housing and Community Development Department for the development and construction of at least one community resilience center.

The agreement stated that the centers could house programs related to education, job training and the California Conservation Corps program operations, as well as be a temporary evacuation shelter in times of emergency.

Public meetings are planned to be held beginning sometime this fall to gather public input from the community on what they would like to see from the projects.

All projects are scheduled to be completed by 2022 as required by the grant.

