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New partnership established to protect Lake Tahoe and Central Sierra

Submitted by paula on Tue, 08/22/2017 - 5:26pm



Chris Mertens, California Tahoe Conservancy

Today at the 21st annual Lake Tahoe Summit, the creation of a new partnership of state, federal, environmental, industry, and research representatives working together to protect Lake Tahoe and the surrounding central Sierra Nevada was announced. The effort, the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative, is focused on restoring the health and resilience of the area's forests and watersheds. It builds on the legacy of work that has been done to "Keep Tahoe Blue," and a variety of activities already underway in the Central Sierra landscape. These include innovative approaches designed to reduce the risks and impacts from large, damaging wildfires and unprecedented tree die-off.

"Here at Lake Tahoe, we are reminded once again of the effects of climate change on our landscape. Restoring the health and resilience of our forests is critical, and efforts such as the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative are essential in reducing the greenhouse gas emissions associated with wildfire and tree mortality," said California Natural Resources Agency Secretary John Laird.

Contrary to what many visitors believe, forests in this area are overgrown, unhealthy, and primed for fast-moving wildfires and the rapid spread of insects and disease. Across the state, more than 102 million trees have died from drought, insects, and disease since 2010, and according to the most recent State of the Lake Report, the number of dead trees in the Lake Tahoe Basin has more than doubled from 35,000 to 72,000 in the last year.

"Our window for action is closing. We need a new strategy to accelerate the forest management activities that will protect the Tahoe-Central Sierra area from landscape-changing events like tree mortality or another Angora or King Fire," said U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region Regional Forester Randy Moore.

The primary goal of Tahoe-Central Sierra Resilient Forest Initiative (TCSI) is to improve the health and resiliency of the forest ecosystems and communities in the TCSI landscape, ensuring that the wide variety of benefits that the region provides continue in to the future. The TCSI is focused on the landscape of the Lake Tahoe Basin and the American, Bear, Truckee, and Yuba watersheds, which are crucial for downstream communities, agricultural interests, recreationalists, and the environment.

"The Tahoe-Sierra landscape is a water source for California and northern Nevada communities. The forested watersheds here contain large amounts of carbon, produce wood products and clean energy, are a hotspot of biodiversity, and are a recreational playground for millions of visitors year round," says Jim Branham, Executive Officer for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

The effort is already producing results, as last week CAL FIRE announced the award of a \$5 million grant to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to implement high-priority forest health projects within the TCSI area. Work will occur on three priority landscape management units within the Tahoe-Central Sierra area: The South Fork of the American River Watershed (SOFAR), the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership (Lake Tahoe West), and the Tahoe Headwaters Treasured Landscape. These three landscapes stretch across federal, state, local, and private lands that are state and local priorities for collaborative action due to the complex issues facing them, and the values that are at risk.

"This region is home to several large-scale collaborative efforts to improve the health and resiliency of our forests and watersheds," said Patrick Wright, Executive Director of the California Tahoe Conservancy. "This initiative will connect these efforts to achieve new breakthroughs in how we manage these landscapes, from expanding the use of fire, increasing carbon storage, and streamlining permitting, to establishing new markets for wood products and bioenergy."

The TCSI is led by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the California Tahoe Conservancy, in partnership with the United States Forest Service Region 5, USFS Pacific Southwest Research Station, The Nature Conservancy, National Forest Foundation, University of California, Natural Reserve System-Sagehen Creek Field Station, and the California Forestry Association, with additional partners becoming engaged as the effort gains momentum.

Additional information about the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative can be found at www.restorethesierra.org/tahoesierra.

A short video about the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative is available at <https://spark.adobe.com/video/owEW1iS0nq3zr>