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IN CALIFORNIA'S SIERRA NEVADA, PUTTING THE TREES TO WORK

By [Julie Cart](#) | Jan. 23, 2018 | [ENVIRONMENT](#)

This is going to be a big year for one of the state's smallest agencies.

As California redoubles its efforts to reduce greenhouse gases, officials are rooting around for new ways to meet the state's goals. Included in their plan: recruiting billions of redwood, oak and pine trees to help diminish planet-warming gases by pulling carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

It's a major pivot, from regulating harmful emissions solely from factories and cars to calling on nature to pitch in. Officials say 2018 is the moment for the state to harness, and fully measure, the role forests can play in addressing the pressing problems of wildfires and the dangerous releases of carbon that occur when millions of forested acres burn. Both issues are accelerating in alarming, parallel lines.

A good bit of the work will fall to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, one of 10 conservancies within the state's Natural Resources Agency.

The group—two dozen multitasking scientists, biologists and planners in a nondescript office park in Auburn, an old gold-rush town in the Sierra foothills—was born in 2004 with a mandate nearly as vast as the region. Like the state's iconic coastline, the Sierra Nevada mountains are a defining feature of California, rising sharply to dizzying elevations, topping out at Mount Whitney's 14,500 feet, the highest peak in the lower 48 states.

The range, tracing the spine of the state across 22 counties from the Oregon border to deep inside the Mojave Desert south of Bakersfield, holds most of California's forested land and is the source of 60 percent of the state's drinking water.

The conservancy is charged with restoring the Sierra's environmental and economic health, on a modest \$4.5 million annual operating budget derived entirely from the environmental license-plate fund. The bulk of its work, such as facilitating research and making grants for forest and watershed restoration projects, is paid for with state bond money.

The group has no bulldozers or chain saws; it's largely a clearinghouse and planning entity. But its casual work space lacks the stuffiness of Capitol offices: jeans and hiking boots substitute for Sacramento's skinny suits and wing-tip shoes. Even with an already full to-do list, executive director Jim Branham says, the organization is ready to take on an expanded role policing carbon in the region's forests.

"There is a sense of urgency," Branham said.

The Sierra forests are overgrown and susceptible to both fire and pests, Branham noted. Last year was the most destructive fire year on record, and the state and national forests within California's boundaries are strewn with 129 million dead trees, felled by flames, disease and insects. Years of drought, disease and dead wood fed the infernos. The extent of forest loss could not have been foreseen, Branham said.

"Some of the best scientists in the world have looked at this and didn't come close to predicting what happened," he said. "Our worst fears were nowhere near what actually happened. It's been far worse."

It's the conservancy's unique job to fashion a response appealing to a mosaic of land owners—including the federal government, whose land is included in the conservancy's brief. The federal component alone is a contentious issue for some of the three-quarter-million Sierra residents.

The sprawling Sierra, its deep forests studded with icy blue lakes, is not just a geological divide but also a political one. Towns tucked into these foothills and mountains are often deeply conservative and proudly self-sufficient.

Some residents are of the opinion that government—Sacramento and Washington alike—is already too present in their lives and businesses. The California Farm Bureau was on record opposing the establishment of the conservancy. When the Legislature created it, some locals looked askance at what they anticipated would be yet another bureaucratic agency bossing them around.

Doug Teeter was among those residents. Teeter, who is on the Butte County Board of Supervisors, said increasing limits on the use of off-road vehicles and other recreation on federal lands had caused him to harbor anti-government views. When it became his turn to sit on the conservancy's 16-member board, he was skeptical.

"I was hesitant," he said, fearing the influence of outside environmentalists would impose their will on the region.

But while the agency often conceives of and oversees projects, it does not have the staff to undertake them, instead funding local, state or federal agencies and groups. When it became clear that the conservancy's focus was clearing out forests and shoring up watersheds, Teeter was won over. The agency has doled out \$60 million in grants since its inception, rather than hand down edicts, and that has gone a long way to win over locals, he said.

"My community has been a big recipient of SNC grants," Teeter said. Grants to Butte County have gone to restoration of natural streams, the thinning of forests for fire safety and a wastewater project in the town of Paradise, near Chico. "I see the on-the-ground effort that the conservancy has made in our community. Money talks, and people listen when they want that money."

The Sierra had a once-booming economy as the center of the gold rush and timber cutting, but those industries are in the rearview mirror. Today, people are hurting. Branham, who has been running the conservancy since its inception and is sensitive to local sentiment, found a way to marry the needs of the forest to the economy. He made a strategic decision to achieve results by bringing together groups historically indisposed to sitting at the same table: county officials, timber companies, environmental groups and federal land managers.



There's 'a sense of urgency' about the conservancy's mission, its director says. Image by Bureau of Land Management via Flickr

Lacking the regulatory teeth to force landowners or counties to act, the conservancy took a soft-power approach, acting as a broker to champion projects that either employed local businesses or boosted the region's economy through forest clearing or watershed projects.

Restoring forests is "a tremendous economic driver" Branham said. "That's the other part of our mission. It puts people to work and produces material from the forest. It was a pretty nice fit to say this ecological restoration initiative across the region serves to make the environment healthier, but it can also serve to make the economy work better."

The scope of the conservancy's mission narrowed after the devastating 2013 Rim Fire, which raged for more than a year, burning a quarter-million acres of forest in the central Sierra. That fire made it clear the conservancy could not mend every broken place in its portfolio.

Since then, Branham said, the agency's work has focused more on forest thinning to minimize fire threats and sustain healthier trees, which stabilize slopes that store valuable water underground. That work clearly dovetails with the state's interest in using forests to capture carbon emissions and finding ways to reduce the significant carbon release that accompanies massive wildfires.

The conservancy has recently partnered with CalFire, the state firefighting agency, which is turning over \$5 million in proceeds from the state's cap-and-trade system for reducing harmful emissions. The money will pay for forest and watershed restoration around Lake Tahoe that is expected to create multiple benefits: Clearing crowded forests allows more healthy trees to grow, take in and store carbon in the ground and stabilize soils that hold water.

"I applaud the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's work to increase the amount of carbon captured by our forests," said state Sen. Bob Wieckowski, a Democrat from Fremont who chairs the Senate Environmental Quality Committee. "The more we can rely on our green infrastructure and let nature help us to mitigate climate change..., the better off we will be."

But even the most generous of grants, welcome as they are, don't go a long way across a vast landscape. A \$25 million grant from a state water bond was greeted with excitement but tempered by the enormity of the Sierra itself.

"We thought, 'Awesome, that's, uh, ... one ... dollar per... acre,'" said Brittany Covich, the agency's outreach manager.

More money and political will may be available this year, from more cap-and-trade revenue and funding directed by the state Air Resources Board to manage greenhouse gases. Projects those funds could pay for are in the planning stages.

Branham has been around long enough to know that the political spotlight seldom lingers, and the important thing is to act quickly.

"My experience with these issues is sometimes those opportunities close quicker than you would expect," he said. "It's a matter of how much can we do."