

Sierra-Cascade  
**LANDSCAPE  
INVESTMENT  
STRATEGY**

Updated October 2024

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# 1. Background & Goals

The governor's [Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force](#) (Task Force), established in 2021 to establish a more holistic and integrated approach to building forest health and community resilience, has catalyzed the development of a Landscape Investment Strategy (LIS) in the Sierra-Cascade Region. As part of the state's comprehensive strategy to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk by treating one million acres annually by 2025, the goal of the Sierra-Cascade LIS is to coordinate, leverage, and scale state and federal investment across the region to accelerate the development and implementation of landscape-scale restoration initiatives.

The Sierra-Cascade LIS seeks to direct significant, multi-agency, state, and federal funding to collaborative land management partnerships that develop, plan, and implement portfolios of projects across a landscape. This strategy can enable project proponents to efficiently fund and administer project portfolios, realize economies of scale for project implementation, and achieve resilience outcomes at landscape-scale.

On behalf of the Task Force and state and federal partners, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) will implement the Sierra-Cascade LIS through a new landscape grant pilot program. Section 2 of this document describes how this pilot program will coordinate and direct investment to partnerships that can demonstrate readiness for funding and project implementation at the landscape scale. Section 3 describes how the Landscape Investment Strategy and the pilot program will help SNC advance the goals of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program, complementing SNC's longstanding commitment to capacity building, technical assistance, project development, and project implementation.

## Responding to Challenges & Realizing Opportunities

The Sierra-Cascade LIS is designed to respond to several challenges currently hindering forest restoration and wildfire resilience at a landscape scale.

- High-severity wildfire, tree mortality, and other major forest disturbances increasingly occur across large landscapes (tens to hundreds of thousands of acres). However, funding levels primarily remain scaled to and directed at the project level (thousands of acres maximum).
- State and federal funding for forest restoration and wildfire resilience and recovery is spread across multiple agencies, departments, and programs that target similar outcomes. This fragmentation means the partnerships must spend significant time and resources chasing multiple funding opportunities to implement even a single project or project component—effectively redirecting resources away from on-the-ground efforts.

The Sierra-Cascade LIS intends to respond to these challenges by enabling regional partnerships that have met certain readiness criteria to access multi-year, directed funding to implement landscape-scale forest restoration and wildfire resilience initiatives. This strategy can incentivize partnerships to target their solutions to the scale of the problem by assessing and planning portfolios of work across a landscape.

The Sierra-Cascade LIS offers a vehicle for state and federal agencies and departments to coordinate their efforts and leverage each other's investments to achieve wildfire resilience and forest health goals. This funding model supports the state's efforts to track outcomes and streamline reporting in a shared language and format.

Coordinating investments through SNC can also simplify administrative processes for both partnerships and funders, while enabling all involved to benefit from SNC's grantmaking and grants management experience, regional expertise, and deep partner relationships.

Over the long term, the LIS can empower partnerships to achieve landscape resilience, using a process that is informed by local needs, coordinated by regional experts, aligned with state and federal priorities, and vetted through assessments and tracking to ensure accountability.

## Aligning State and Federal Initiatives

The Sierra-Cascade LIS aims to connect and align multiple state and federal initiatives investing in collaboration, capacity, science and data, and project planning and implementation in the Sierra-Cascade Region. With forest health as the foundation, the LIS will support multi-benefit projects that restore ecosystems, improve community resilience, support sustainable recreation and tourism, and conserve natural and working lands.

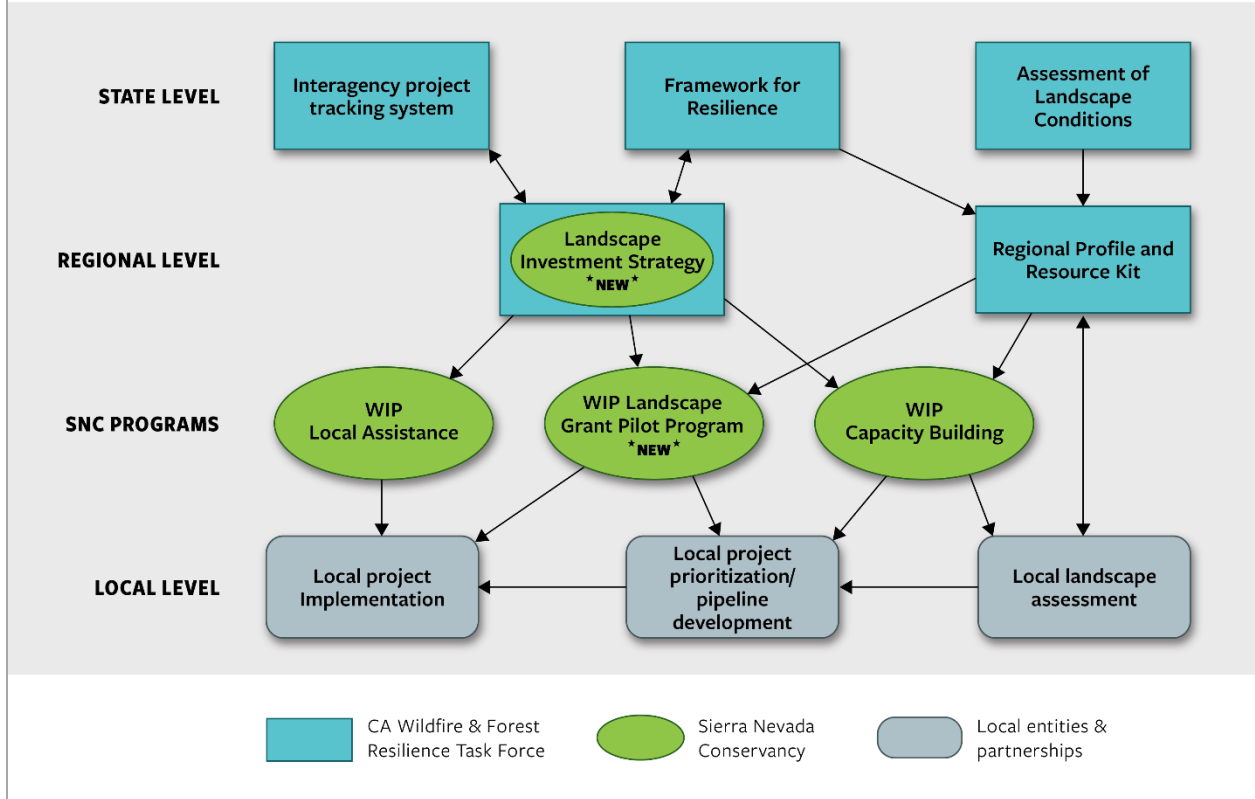
- To implement the [Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#), the Task Force is developing a set of resources that will help operationalize statewide interagency strategies while also aligning with regional goals and priorities. These new resources will include a tracking system to measure progress toward the million-acre target, landscape assessments and metrics to understand forest conditions and monitor resilience outcomes, access to decision-support tools to support project prioritization, and resource kits to increase partner capacity and accelerate project development and planning. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (USFS) is also currently working with the Task Force to develop joint state-federal landscape priorities. The Sierra-Cascade LIS is designed to put all these efforts into action (see Figure 1).

- The Sierra-Cascade LIS contributes to the execution of the [Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California’s Forest and Rangelands between California and the Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region](#) and advances many of the principles included in that agreement, including to utilize science, improve efficiency, scale up ecologically based forestry, and collaborate and innovate with all stakeholders.
- The USFS has supported the [Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program](#) for the past ten years, with multiple awards to collaborative groups in the Sierra-Cascade Region. As the first phase of the agency’s new 10-year Confronting the Wildfire Crisis strategy, the Forest Service recently announced initial landscape investments that will bring approximately \$80 million to the Tahoe and Stanislaus national forests.
- The [California Department of Conservation’s Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program \(RFFCP\)](#) is working with regional block grantees, including SNC, to build capacity, develop project pipelines, and coordinate landscape planning and prioritization for forest restoration and wildfire resilience projects. The RFFCP aims to prepare partnerships for landscape grants.
- A constellation of state and federal funders—including [Sierra Nevada Conservancy](#), [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection](#), the [Wildlife Conservation Board](#), the [Department of Water Resources](#), the [Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation](#), [USDA Forest Service](#), [National Resource Conservation Service](#), and the [U.S. Department of the Interior](#)—fund wildfire and forest resilience efforts on private and public lands across the Sierra-Cascade.
- The state has recently finalized several policy documents that articulate the importance of forest health and wildfire resilience in achieving multiple state goals. These documents include the [Natural & Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy](#), the [Pathways to 30x30 strategy](#), the [Climate Adaption Strategy](#), and the 2022 draft [Scoping Plan](#) to achieve California’s Assembly Bill 32 climate change target and carbon neutrality commitment under Executive Order N-79-20.

# The **LANDSCAPE INVESTMENT STRATEGY**

*Links*

**TASK FORCE** efforts & the Sierra Nevada **WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM**



**Figure 1.** The Sierra-Cascade LIS will help make progress towards Task Force goals in the Sierra-Cascade Region while complementing SNC’s existing grant programs under the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program. This graphic depicts the relationship between the Task Force’s efforts, this Landscape Investment Strategy, and partnership-driven efforts to advance restoration projects. These initiatives are interconnected and mutually informed by one another. The Task Force resources referenced here are currently under development.

## 2. Proposed Landscape Grant Pilot Program

To implement the Sierra-Cascade LIS on behalf of the Task Force and state and federal partners, SNC proposes a new Landscape Grant Pilot Program (LGPP). The LGPP will integrate federal- and state-level strategies, data, and tools with landscape-level prioritization, planning, and expertise to accelerate high-impact forest restoration and wildfire resilience initiatives. Contingent on funding received, SNC will award landscape grants to fund partnerships serving large, ecologically defined landscapes to implement landscape-scale project portfolios over 5 – 10 years.

The LGPP is a pilot program. As a pilot, it aims to respond to the challenges identified above by testing the following approaches:

- Pooling funding from multiple sources, including state and federal agencies, in large grants to eligible partnerships to support implementation of strategic project portfolios across a landscape over a 5- to 10-year timeframe
- Reducing administrative time and realizing efficiencies for both partnerships and state and federal funders with shared objectives
- Applying data and assessment resources, like those under development by the Task Force, to match funding sources with project portfolios and anticipated outcomes to measure impact at a landscape scale

The LGPP will be a directed grant program. The process for evaluating and selecting partnerships will respond to the requirements and priorities of the funding agencies and funding sources, landscape need, and partnership readiness to accept and implement a landscape grant. The SNC will work collaboratively with Task Force leaders and funding partners to determine final funding amounts, criteria, and processes.

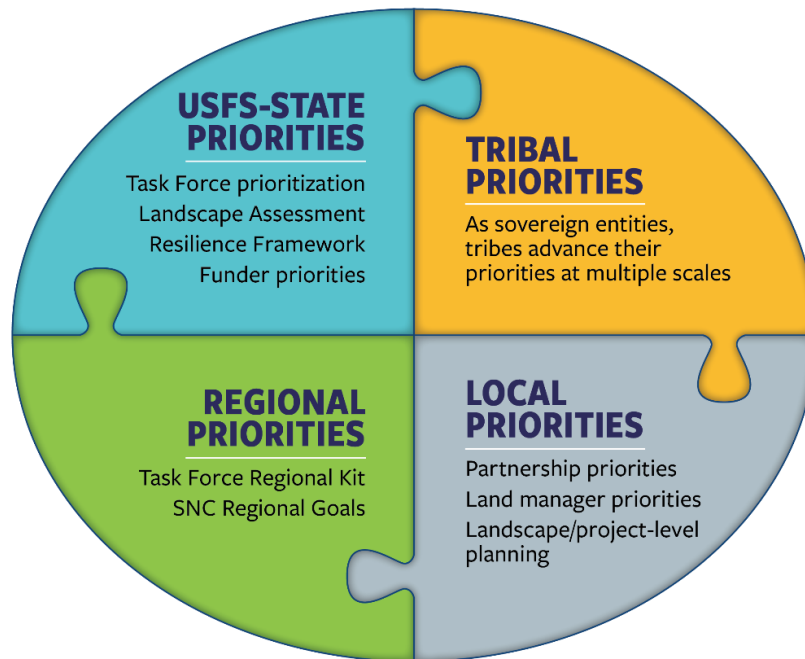
The funding for this pilot will focus on forest health and wildfire risk reduction activities. While no funding is guaranteed beyond the pilot phase, SNC will seek other funding partners to augment this program and to expand the scope of eligible activities to include workforce development and biomass infrastructure.

### Identifying Shared Priorities for Landscape Investments

In developing the Landscape Grant Pilot Program, the SNC will work with the Task Force, USFS leaders, and land managers to identify landscapes and affiliated partnerships that may be good candidates for landscape grants (see Figure 2 below). The SNC will also work directly with funders to identify investment opportunities that can either flow through SNC as part of the LGPP, or alongside a landscape grant to increase impact. Local partnerships will lead the identification, development, and implementation of landscape-level priorities and project portfolios.

In addition to investments in project implementation, SNC and USFS may mutually agree to hire dedicated staff to support landscape projects that deliver on state, federal, regional, and local priorities. To date, USFS has already provided financial support for one position at the SNC to support the development of strategic partnerships and this investment strategy.

## Landscape Grants Connect Priorities



**Figure 2.** The SNC and Task Force partners will tailor the Landscape Grant Pilot Program to align priorities across partners. The Task Force Regional Kit, Landscape Assessment, Resilience Framework, and funder priorities are in the process of being developed.

Pending direction from SNC’s Governing Board, SNC will enter into agreements with funding agencies to implement the LGPP. The SNC is actively seeking funding contributions from federal and state agencies.

The multi-agency funding structure of a landscape grant is designed to incentivize regional partnerships to broaden the scope of their plans and include multi-benefit projects related to climate change, biodiversity conservation, recreation and access, and community resilience.



## Grant Process

The SNC will work with Task Force leadership and funding partners to develop eligibility and evaluation criteria and a selection process for awarding the grant(s). This will ensure that Task Force priorities, funding restrictions, and funder priorities are reflected in the pilot program.

To be eligible for a landscape grant, potential grantees must meet the eligibility criteria. Activities funded by the grant must also meet the requirements tied to each source of funding. Draft eligibility criteria are listed below, but additional requirements may vary depending on the funding sources for the LGPP.

Once potential grantees are identified, SNC will work with Task Force leadership and the funding organization(s) to evaluate eligible partnerships and project portfolios and recommend awards. Draft evaluation criteria are listed below and are subject to change pending direction from funding agencies. Both the evaluation criteria and the amount of funding available will guide SNC in selecting partnerships for award.

Following award selection, awardees and the SNC will negotiate and execute a grant agreement(s) with the SNC.

## Eligibility and Evaluation

In making awards under the LGPP, the SNC will consider both the strength of the partnership and the anticipated outcomes from implementing the portfolio of projects. Although the LGPP will be a directed grant program, specific eligibility and evaluation criteria will guide the grantmaking process. The SNC will work with the Task Force and funding agencies to finalize all criteria for this pilot phase.

Should the program be expanded beyond the pilot phase, these criteria may be adjusted according to varying funding sources, state and federal priorities, and regional needs.

### Eligibility Criteria

Only partnerships satisfying the following criteria will be considered eligible for funding under the LGPP. Because funding for the pilot is limited at this time, meeting these eligibility criteria does not guarantee funding. The SNC will work directly with partnerships to determine eligibility.

These criteria are intended to align with the principles for regional priority plans established by the California Department Of Conservation's [RFFCP 2022 Final Grant Guidelines](#) to ensure partnerships meet common core elements.

To be eligible for funding, partnerships must demonstrate the following:

- Landscape scale
- Governance, prioritization, decision making, and participation
- Assessment, monitoring, and evaluation
- Project portfolio
- Implementation and administrative capacity

## **Landscape Scale**

The partnership and project portfolio must operate at the landscape level. Applicants must present clear and defensible logic in defining the landscape of interest based on ecological considerations (e.g., watershed, fireshed). The landscape should not be so large that the outcomes of the grant are diffuse due to scattered projects. While there is no strict acreage minimum, landscapes are generally expected to be at least the size of Hydrologic Unit Code 10 watershed.

## **Governance, Prioritization, Decision Making, and Participation**

The partnership must have a clearly defined governance, prioritization, and decision-making process that can effectively develop and implement projects over time. Partnerships are expected to have broad-based stakeholder and tribal involvement and support and include entities capable of serving as lead agency under both National Environmental Policy Act and California Environmental Quality Act.

## **Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation**

The partnership must have a clear and defensible methodology for assessing landscape conditions to support project prioritization, monitoring, and evaluation of activities over time.

## **Project Portfolio**

The partnership must have a list of collaboratively developed, prioritized projects that respond to needs identified in a landscape assessment. Project portfolios may include a mix of projects in various stages of readiness. Specific grant deliverables will be negotiated in the grant agreement, but implementation of the project portfolio is expected to make a significant, positive impact on landscape resilience in the course of a 5 – 10-year grant period. Not all projects that will be implemented over the grant period are expected to be shovel-ready at the time of the award.

## **Implementation and Administrative Capacity**

Partnerships must demonstrate that they can administer the funds and complete agreed-upon deliverables over the course of the grant period. Grantees will need to demonstrate strong administrative and implementation experience. The SNC will evaluate past grantee and partner performance with similar grant programs.

## Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation of the project portfolios will consider the following elements. Additional evaluation criteria may be developed in collaboration with the Task Force and funding agencies.

- Link to assessment and prioritization process—The project portfolio should respond to the risks and opportunities identified through the partnership’s landscape assessment and reflect the partnership’s prioritization process.
- Project feasibility—The portfolio can include projects in various stages of readiness; however, applicants will need to demonstrate a clear pathway to complete agreed-upon deliverables in the grant period. The SNC will evaluate the applicant’s staff and/or contractor capacity to complete environmental compliance and project preparation activities.
- Tie back to funding agency priorities—Activities and outcomes from the portfolio must be eligible under and respond to the priorities of the funding sources.
- Opportunity for multiple benefits—The SNC will prioritize project portfolios that are likely to yield multiple, beneficial outcomes in addition to the primary priorities of funding agencies.
- High impact—The program will support project portfolios that deliver meaningful impact at the landscape scale. Priority will be given to projects that are cohesive and sufficient in scale to respond to landscape-scale wildfire, watershed, and ecosystem health priorities.

## Grant Reporting and Monitoring

In developing the Landscape Grant Pilot Program, the SNC seeks to build efficiency for grantees in grant management and reporting. The SNC will work with the Task Force, funding agencies, and grantees to utilize standardized reporting systems and integrate reporting and monitoring requirements. The grant agreement(s) will identify all necessary reporting measures, and SNC will consolidate grant reporting and monitoring requirements to the greatest extent possible.

## 3. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy’s Role

As a trusted regional leader, SNC is well-positioned to implement the Sierra-Cascade LIS on behalf of the Task Force. Located throughout the Region, the SNC staff is closely connected to local partners, tribes, and federal and private land managers. As a department, SNC frequently acts as an intermediary between local, state, and federal entities—helping on-the-ground partners advance their projects in alignment with state goals, elevating needs and best practices that emerge at a local level, and linking community and state efforts to federal priorities and opportunities.

The SNC also has the administrative experience and mechanisms to act as a fiscal sponsor for projects with multiple funding sources. The SNC grants its own state-appropriated funds, has partnered with other state agencies to subgrant funding to the Sierra-Cascade Region, and has multiple Good Neighbor Authority agreements with USFS.

### About the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy’s goal is to protect, conserve, and enhance the unique resources of the Sierra-Cascade. The SNC focuses on local solutions, enhancing and adding value to community and regional efforts. Using the newest science and information, SNC finds integrated solutions that serve environmental, social, and economic needs, while also providing information on Sierra-Cascade issues, opportunities, and the value of this Region to California.

The SNC is guided by four Regional Goals, described in its [Strategic Plan](#):

- Healthy Forests and Watersheds
- Resilient Sierra-Cascade Communities
- Sustainable Recreation and Tourism and Equitable Outdoor Access
- Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands

These goals complement the pillars guiding the [Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#), positioning SNC to connect community-driven actions to improve forest health and resilience with state and federal priorities. Forest health is the foundation of these five goals, and it remains the primary focus of the Sierra-Cascade LIS.

### Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program

By innovating new ways to coordinate, leverage, and scale investment, the Sierra-Cascade LIS can meaningfully increase the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration and

advance the goals of the [Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program](#) (WIP), SNC's keystone initiative.

The SNC developed the WIP as a large-scale, holistic effort to restore resilience to the forested landscapes and communities throughout its service area. The WIP both weaves together the goals articulated in SNC's strategic plan and supports partners through every stage in the life of a project, from convening partnerships and identifying landscape needs through project implementation.

These efforts are advanced through SNC's two primary grant programs: WIP Capacity Building and WIP Local Assistance Grants.

## **WIP Capacity Building**

This program, implemented primarily by the SNC's Partnerships & Community Support unit, blends staff support and direct funding to build workforce and organizational capacity to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration. Aligned with and funded by the Department of Conservation's Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program, [SNC's capacity-building efforts](#) are designed to help local partnerships and collaborative groups increase their ability to plan and prioritize landscape-scale forest health and fire protection activities, engage tribal partners and diverse stakeholders, build project pipelines, obtain long-term funding, provide workforce training, and develop functional partnerships and the associated infrastructure to implement landscape-scale programs of work over many years.

## **WIP Local Assistance Grants**

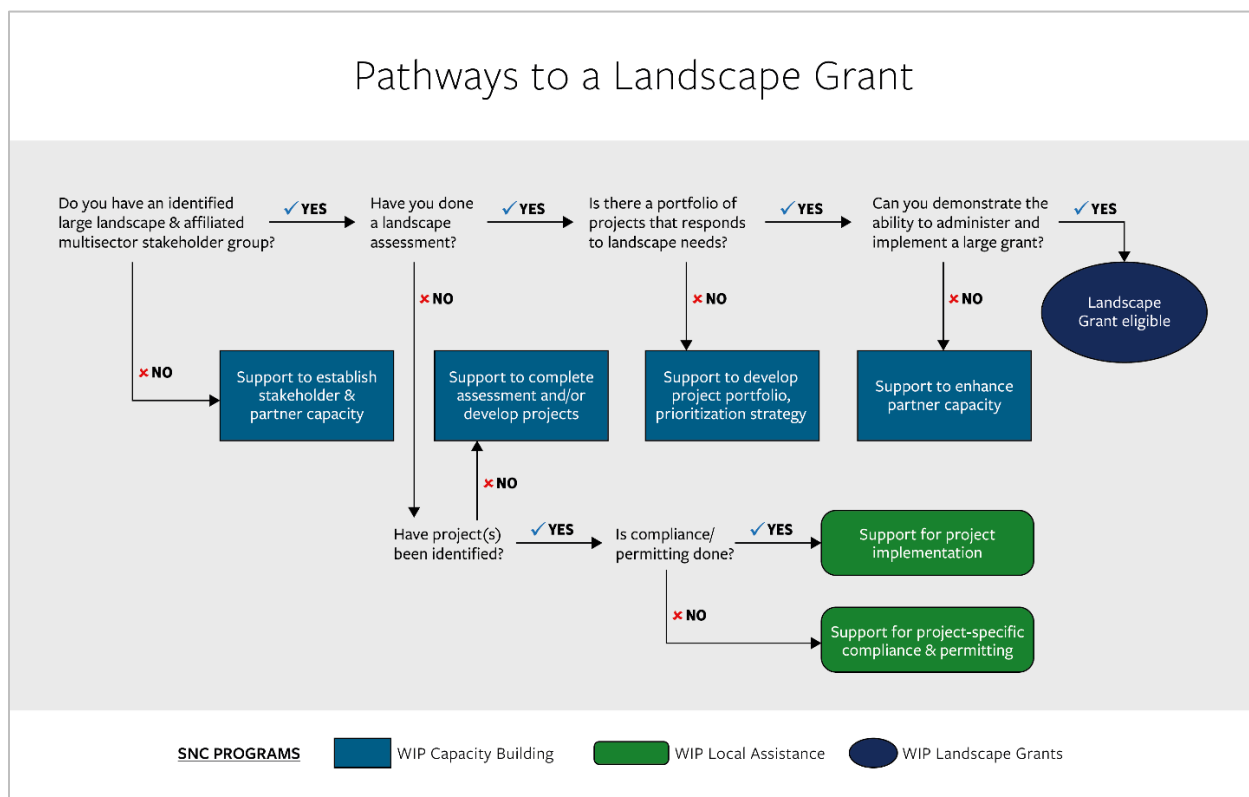
The SNC's [Local Assistance Program](#), implemented primarily by SNC's Field Operations & Grants team, directly funds partners to plan and implement specific projects that advance SNC's Regional Goals and Task Force Action Plan objectives. Proposal scoring criteria are used to prioritize projects that are developed with input from diverse stakeholders and local tribes, are relevant in the context of other landscape treatments, have significant public benefit, and are aligned with federal, state and SNC policy and restoration objectives. This funding is complemented by hands-on staff support in helping local organizations build key partnerships, develop, plan, and implement projects, and manage grants. The SNC Area Staff tracks priorities and trends in the Region to inform state policy as well as identify and share best practices and local needs and opportunities.

## **The Landscape Grant Pilot Program as part of the WIP**

The LGPP will complement SNC's existing grant programs under the WIP to create a holistic set of opportunities and resources for partnerships at every stage. The SNC's long-term goal is for all Sierra-Cascade watersheds and communities to be able to engage in a

large-landscape restoration strategy to protect homes and assets, restore the resilience of forests and watersheds, and advance community resilience. However, SNC recognizes that every partnership has different needs, and that resources must be simultaneously available for capacity-building, project development and planning, project implementation, and landscape-scale initiatives.

A sample decision tree (below) illustrates how SNC will support capacity building, immediate action, and landscape-scale initiatives. Local partners can use the decision tree to understand which of SNC’s grant programs are best suited to their priorities and projects and how they can progress toward readiness for a landscape grant.



**Figure 3.** This decision tree illustrates how local partners can access SNC staff and funding resources to move toward readiness for a landscape grant while also building capacity and taking immediate action. See Section 2 for a detailed list of eligibility criteria.

The SNC’s capacity-building initiatives will continue to provide staff assistance, technical expertise, and financial resources to help local partnerships develop governance structures and decision-making processes, conduct permitting and compliance activities, and identify a landscape portfolio of projects. Recognizing that action to protect our communities and forests must also be taken immediately, and that many valuable projects are not part of a landscape-scale initiative, SNC will also continue to assist local partners to design, plan, and implement priority wildfire restoration and forest health projects via WIP Local Assistance Grants and staff support.