

## **Background**

### **Integration with the Strategic Plan**

In March 2015, the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) was launched in partnership with the United States Forest Service (USFS) Region 5. The WIP is a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes. The SNC is designated as the lead state agency for coordination and implementation of the WIP and hosts an annual WIP Summit with key partners for discussions on current issues and strategies for more effectively implementing the WIP.

Under the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan approved by the SNC Governing Board in December 2018, the WIP was expanded to become SNC's overarching program. This expansion broadened the focus of the WIP from primarily a forest health program to incorporate all the following Regional Goals: Healthy Forests and Watersheds, Vibrant Recreation and Tourism, Strategic Lands Conserved, Resilient Sierra Nevada Communities, and cultivation of an Impactful Regional Identity for the Sierra Nevada Region.

### **Partnerships and Pilot Projects – Healthy Watersheds and Forests**

Due to the number of innovative efforts and partnerships underway in the Central Sierra/Tahoe Region, SNC identified the Tahoe-Central Sierra area as a large pilot landscape for the WIP with a variety of specific "game-changer" demonstration opportunities in particular watersheds. The SNC co-leads and coordinates the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI) with the California Tahoe Conservancy, working closely with USFS Region 5, the Eldorado and Tahoe national forests, and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. Many other agency and organization partners are actively engaged, including The Nature Conservancy, the National Forest Foundation, Sagehen Experimental Forest, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the California Forestry Association, and the University of California. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in March 2017, and under the 2017-18 CA Climate Investments program, CAL FIRE funded four grants totaling \$27.5 million to the SNC, California Tahoe Conservancy, National Forest Foundation, and American River Conservancy to implement high-priority forest health projects in the TCSI landscape. This funding complements a \$5 million award in 2016-2017 to the SNC from the same CAL FIRE program for the implementation of TCSI forest health projects.

While TCSI watershed demonstration projects will receive staff and financial support from SNC, efforts will continue at the Regional level to pursue WIP objectives benefitting the entire Region. These include increased investment, policy and process improvements, and increased infrastructure. The SNC will continue to fund projects and work with partners throughout the Region to further the purposes of the WIP.

## **Current Status**

### **SNC Strategic and Action Plan Update**

Both the Strategic and Action Plans have been approved and finalized. As of January 1, 2019, the electronic versions were posted on the SNC website. Printed versions of the Strategic Plan and the Annual Report were completed and ready for distribution mid-January. Staff also developed a distribution plan to make sure that all interested stakeholders and important decision-makers receive a copy.

Staff is working to ensure that all stakeholders and partners who participated in the Regional Strategic Assessment conducted early last year are being notified of the availability of the plans and thanked for their participation.

SNC staff is updating communications materials to reflect the elevation and expansion of the WIP under SNC's updated Strategic and Action Plan update. The updated WIP Summary handout can be found in [Attachment A](#) to this report. The staff has also been working to ensure that the WIP's online presence reflects the holistic nature of the program. The WIP page on the SNC website has a new look and feel that is more consistent with the WIP brand, and more in line with modern website design styles. The WIP web presence can be accessed directly from the SNC homepage or by going to [www.restorethesierra.org](http://www.restorethesierra.org).

Already this year, staff has begun or continued work on 40 of the 57 action items identified in the 18-month Action Plan. The management team and staff continue to work on plans for full implementation of the remaining 17 actions and the methodology that will be used to track and report on them. As we move through the year we will be providing details on actions and achievements in implementing the Action Plan throughout our Board Reports and presentations.

Today the Board will be reviewing grants that implement funding strategies to help achieve the Healthy Watersheds and Forests, Resilient Sierra Nevada Communities, Vibrant Recreation and Tourism, and Strategic Lands Conserved Regional Goals. While today's WIP Report primarily focuses on some of the larger partnerships under Healthy Watersheds and Forests, the Board can expect that future WIP reports will provide more updates in the other Regional Goal areas as well.

### **Sierra Nevada Strategic Investment Plan – Benefitting All Regional Goals**

At the March 2018 annual WIP Summit, CAL FIRE Chief Ken Pimlott urged the SNC to convene a meeting of state agencies to discuss the development of a Sierra Nevada Strategic Investment Plan (SNSIP). The purpose of the plan is to develop a more effective way for state agencies to invest funds in a strategic, coordinated, and impactful manner. Given the substantial amount of funding available across state agencies, there is a unique opportunity to significantly move Sierra Nevada watersheds towards health and resilience and to achieve a number of state policy objectives. The initial meeting

with key partners was held on May 24 in Sacramento which established a foundation of agreement. Follow-up meetings with extended groups of participants were held in August, September, November, and January. An MOU that formalizes the intentions of the group was finalized at the November meeting, and while additional partners are being added, signatories presently include:

- California Natural Resources Agency
- California Environmental Protection Agency
- Sierra Nevada Conservancy
- California Tahoe Conservancy
- California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife
- California Wildlife Conservation Board
- California Department of Conservation
- California Air Resources Board
- California Conservation Corps
- California Department of Parks and Recreation

The group is currently developing guiding criteria and Regional analyses to identify opportunities to leverage investment of state funds more effectively in the Sierra Nevada.

#### Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative – Healthy Watersheds and Forests, Resilient Sierra Nevada Communities, and Impactful Regional Identity

TCSI partners have been working together to apply strategies to ensure effective implementation of the recent \$27.5 million in grant awards secured from CAL FIRE's California Climate Investments program for the TCSI area. This includes identifying opportunities to maximize and leverage limited resources for restoration implementation and developing more effective marketing techniques and forums to engage contractors in bidding for available contracts. This is particularly important given the limited capacity of contractors to implement the ever-growing portfolio of watershed restoration work available due to the accelerating pipeline of state funding. However, the federal shutdown has had significant impacts on these efforts. TCSI partners had planned a contractors' fair on January 14, 2019, to provide potential contractors an overview of the range of contracts available on the TCSI landscape and potential opportunities to leverage them to increase implementation capacity, but the workshop had to be cancelled. TCSI partners also had to cancel their January TCSI Steering Committee call, and the group is in a holding pattern until federal agencies can resume work.

#### Southern Sierra Leadership Forum – Healthy Watersheds and Forests

The Southern Sierra Leadership Forum (SSLF), an executive-level collaboration between the Southern Sierra federal land management agencies, state Natural Resource agencies, and Southern Sierra counties, has scheduled its next meeting date

for April 9-10 in the vicinity of the Sequoia National Forest. Mapping, Governance and Planning Committees have all had phone calls to develop detailed work plans and deliverables in advance of the spring meeting. However, given that the SSLF and subcommittees are composed mostly of federal staff, progress has been halted due to the federal shutdown.

### **Next Steps**

The SNC staff will continue to work with other state agencies to increase investment in the Region and in the development of the Sierra Nevada Strategic Investment Plan which will create a more holistic and strategic approach to restoring watershed health and resilience. The SNC staff will continue to work in a variety of active roles in all Regional Goal areas, including various local collaborative efforts, as well as several task forces and teams, to move WIP objectives forward. In the Healthy Watersheds and Forests area this includes the SSLF, the TCSI, the Governor's Forest Management Task Force, the Forest Climate Action Team, and a team working on the implementation of the Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding. Staff will provide regular updates to the Board on the progress of the development and implementation of all aspects of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program.

### **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.**