

Background

As previously reported to the Board in September 2018, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) successfully applied for and was awarded a \$10.72 million California Climate Investment (CCI) grant from CAL FIRE to implement five separate forest health projects, planning and environmental review for six future restoration projects, and three research projects in the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI) landscape.

The forest health projects will be implemented through sub-grants and contracts to the Eldorado National Forest and Placer County. The planning and environmental review work for future projects will be implemented through an inter-agency agreement with the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation District (RCD). The research projects will be conducted through sub-grants to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (USFS) Region 5, the Remote Sensing Laboratory, and the Eldorado National Forest (ENF).

Pursuant to SNC governing statute, staff must seek Board authorization to expend funds at the amounts necessary to implement the CCI grant received.

[Grant Agreement 8GG18601](#) between CAL FIRE and the SNC requires that all California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) responsibilities be completed to their satisfaction before any project work can begin. All implementing partners are prepared to execute contracts and commence project work this field season pending execution of contracts and agreements and completion of remaining CEQA requirements. The Board previously adopted an Initial Study / Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) for the Tobacco Gulch Restoration Project in June 2018. IS/MND will be prepared for the King Fire Restoration project by the SNC, and the remaining projects will likely be exempt under CEQA.

Current Status

The SNC prepared draft contracts for review and approval by California Department of General Services and by the RCD Board of Directors and the Placer County Board of Supervisors, respectively, for the planning and environmental review of six future restoration projects and implementation of the French Meadows Project.

Staff also prepared draft sub-grant agreements for the USDA Forest Service Region 5, Remote Sensing Laboratory, and the Eldorado National Forest, respectively, for the three research projects: HRV Studies, Landscape-Scale Carbon Accounting, and the ENF LiDAR Research project and to implement the Tobacco Gulch Ecological Restoration project within the ENF.

Upon completion of the CEQA analysis and documentation for the Blacksmith, Revenant, and King Fire Restoration Projects within the ENF, staff will seek authorization to finalize and execute the sub-grant agreements and present the CEQA Notices of Exemption and an ISMND to the Board for consideration of adoption at a future meeting.

Staff currently recommends authorization of 6 contracts and sub-grants worth \$4,600,000. Please see [Attachment A](#) for project locations.

Attachments

- [Attachment A: Map of Project Locations](#)

CCI Project Descriptions

Project #R1831015: Planning and Environmental Review *El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide RCD - \$200,000*

Planning and environmental review work for future projects is proposed to be implemented through an inter-agency agreement with the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation District (RCD). The RCD will prepare project-specific CEQA documents for six independent priority fuels reduction projects which cumulatively equate to approximately 1,126 acres of State Responsibility Area (SRA) and Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) lands. The six projects are as follows:

- Texas Hill Vegetation Management Project
- Weber Canyon Wildfire Protection Project
- Cooperton Road Community Wildfire Protection Project
- Blair Road Community Wildfire Protection Project
- Sierra Springs Community Wildfire Protection Project
- New York Creek Fuel Reduction Project Lake Hills 2

CEQA Compliance: The project is Statutorily Exempt under Section 15262. Feasibility and Planning Studies and Categorically Exempt under Class 6 Section 15306. Information Collection.

- To access the Notice of Exemption, [click here](#).

Project #R1833016: French Meadows *Placer County - \$3,500,000*

This project is proposed to be implemented through a contract with Placer County. Placer County will implement restorative treatments for the French Meadows project area using characteristics such as slope, aspect, elevation, soils, and other factors, all based upon the USDA, USFS Pacific Southwest Research Station (PSW) General Technical Report (PSW-GTR-220 (second printing, with addendum) March 2009). The French Meadows activities advance the 25,000-acre French Meadows Forest Restoration Project, a collaborative, all-lands approach to restore forest health and resilience and reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire in the headwaters of the American River, a critical municipal watershed where wildfires in recent years have caused hundreds of thousands of tons of topsoil to erode into the river system; clogging infrastructure; and degrading wildlife habitat, water quality and watershed health.

CEQA Compliance: The project is Exempt under Public Resources Code Section 4799.05 for projects to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire that have been reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act.

- To access the Notice of Exemption, [click here](#).

Eldorado National Forest

The ENF projects are proposed for implementation through sub-grants to ENF. These projects will enhance efforts in the South Fork of the American River (SOFAR) Cohesive Strategy area to recover from the devastating 2014 King Fire, to avoid type-conversion to shrublands, and to restore surrounding areas to a resilient forest landscape which can effectively sequester carbon. There are four projects within the ENF.

Project #CCI001: Blacksmith Eldorado National Forest - \$594,350

Informational Only: Staff will seek authorization to finalize and execute the sub-grant agreement and present the CEQA Notice of Exemption to the Board for consideration of adoption at a future meeting.

This project will remove 500 acres of biomass yarded to landings during commercial and non-commercial mechanical thinning treatments and transportation to a biomass facility. Tractor piling of surface fuels or mastication is planned for all mechanical thinning areas. The funding will cover 500 acres of piling and an additional 142 acres of mastication of small shrubs and small trees. In addition, funding will cover mastication in 145 acres of younger plantations with follow-up shrub control on 26 acres using foliar herbicide application to reduce shrub competition with these trees and maintain lower flame lengths in the event of a wildfire.

CEQA Compliance: CEQA analysis is currently underway. It is anticipated that the project will be Exempt under Public Resources Code Section 4799.05 for projects to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire that have been reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Project #CCI002: Revenant Eldorado National Forest - \$410,000

Informational Only: Staff will seek authorization to finalize and execute the sub-grant agreement and present the CEQA Notice of Exemption to the Board for consideration of adoption at a future meeting.

This project includes mechanical thinning, mastication, tractor piling, hand treatment and prescribed fire. Funds are requested to remove 500 acres of biomass yarded to landings through commercial and non-commercial mechanical thinning treatments and transportation to a biomass facility, and for tractor piling of surface fuels in 700 acres mechanically thinned as part of this project.

CEQA Compliance: CEQA analysis is currently underway. It is anticipated that the project will be Exempt under Public Resources Code Section 4799.05 for projects to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire that have been reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act.

**Project #CCI003: Tobacco Gulch
Eldorado National Forest - \$150,000**

This project was designed to implement mechanical thinning, tractor piling, and mastication and prescribed fire treatments to modify fire behavior and improve forest health and resilience over this landscape to protect the nearby community of Georgetown and important forest lands in this area. Initial mechanical treatments are being completed with the assistance of a 2017 GHG Reduction Grant. To build upon this work, prescribed fire treatments are planned across 2,560 acres in this project where mechanical treatments are restricted, where previous treatments have occurred and require maintenance, and as a part of the compilation of treatments designed to achieve desired fuel conditions in mechanically treated stands. The work includes preparation of fire lines including scraping hand lines, installing tractor lines, falling danger trees, hand thinning needed to prep burn units, ignition, mop-up and patrol activities.

CEQA Compliance: In June 2018, SNC, as Lead Agency, adopted an Initial Study, Mitigated Negative Declaration, and Monitoring and Reporting Program for an earlier phase of this project (Tobacco Gulch Ecological Restoration Project) funded through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. The SNC may file a Notice of Determination as Lead Agency for this current phase of the project.

- To access the Notice of Determination, [click here](#).
- To access the Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration, [click here](#).
- To access the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, [click here](#).

**Project #CCI004: King Fire Restoration Project
Eldorado National Forest - \$3,820,250**

Informational Only: Staff will seek authorization to finalize and execute the sub-grant agreement and present the CEQA document to the Board for consideration of adoption at a future meeting.

This project contains a portion of the over 10,000 acres of National Forest System lands which burned at high intensity in the 2014 King Fire. Due to the brush regrowth, it will be necessary to first have an initial site preparation step to control competing vegetation and maximize seedling growth and survival. This can involve either mastication or site prep broadcast burning. Removal and piling of existing fuels to reduce fuel loading and better ensure survival of seedlings in future wildfires through skidding and piling at landings on 1000 acres where salvage logging was limited due to loss of road access and limited mill capacity following the fire. Biomass from a minimum of 250 acres will be transported to a biomass facility for utilization. Following site preparation, a mix of Ponderosa pine, Sugar

Pine, Douglas-fir and Incense cedar will be planted to density of 200 trees per acre to ensure that the soils hold appropriately and do not contribute to poor water quality. Survival surveys will be conducted at the end of the first and third growing season to ensure adequate survival and stocking of planted seedlings on 1,515 acres.

CEQA Compliance: CEQA analysis is currently underway. It is anticipated that an ISMND and MMRP will be presented to the Board at a future meeting.

Research Projects

The research component of the CCI grant will develop and implement science tools which will be used to inform long-term management of not only these forests, but forests throughout the state. LiDAR, carbon accounting, and other modeling activities will help assess the effectiveness of the proposed practices and will advance best practices for forest management into the future. There are three Research Projects that are proposed to be funded through sub-grants.

Project #CCI005: Landscape-Scale Carbon Accounting

USDA Forest Service Region 5, Remote Sensing Laboratory - \$350,000

This research project is proposed to be funded with a sub-grant with the USDA, Forest Service, Region 5, Remote Sensing Laboratory (RSL). RSL proposes to leverage existing datasets and test future forecasting computer models on the TCSI landscape, the impacts of management activities, and the growth and mortality impacts of drought and fire within TCSI forests. Researchers will use existing TCSI LiDAR to develop a fine-scale, above-ground forest carbon data layer by small watershed, including how much of that carbon is in various size classes of trees. Recent LiDAR data will be compared to original 2013 LiDAR dataset to evaluate the carbon impacts of the King Fire as well as other tree mortality changes. These data will also be used to evaluate carbon impacts of current and past treatment activities as well as to extrapolate impacts of future treatment options. Researchers will use the fine-scale data and trends from the research to evaluate the accuracy of existing models and other forest carbon estimators that are at a much coarser and delayed scale. Finally, the research will inform Remote Sensing Lab products across the Sierra Nevada Region to assess the current state of the forests. The results of this work will inform future management decisions both inside and beyond the borders of the TCSI region.

CEQA Compliance: The project is Categorically Exempt under Class 6 Section 15306. Information Collection.

- To access the Notice of Exemption, [click here](#).

Project #CCI006: Completion of LiDAR on ENF

Eldorado National Forest - \$250,000

This research project is proposed to be funded with a sub-grant with the ENF. Currently, 45 percent of the TCSI landscape is covered by LiDAR acquisitions that occurred over the last five years with large areas on the Eldorado not having any LiDAR coverage making it difficult to match information from multiple datasets. A combination of existing

plot data with additional field data collection will allow a determination of the accuracy of the LiDAR-based estimation and will provide robust outputs. These outputs will provide estimates of carbon and biomass status and trend which will further decrease carbon stock uncertainties and allow carbon storage projects to be accurately identified. These outputs will also aid in accurately estimating forest and fuel structure that will hasten forest and project level planning resulting in quicker and more reliable outputs. Completing LiDAR on the ENF will aid both the forest in project level planning but also assist TCSI to be successful at competing for grant funding in the future.

CEQA Compliance: The project is Categorical Exempt under Class 6 Section 15306. Information Collection.

- To access the Notice of Exemption, [click here](#).

**Project #CCI007: HRV Studies in TCSI Area
USDA Forest Service Region 5 - \$150,000**

This research project is proposed to be funded with a sub-grant with the USDA Forest Service, Region 5. This research component will quantify historic range of variability (HRV) to evaluate the relative effects of alternative future management scenarios on landscape structure. Historic range of variability (HRV) studies the spatially and temporally dynamic mosaic of ecological systems. This dynamic stems from a complex natural and human land use history that is representative of much of the northern Sierra Nevada ecological region. The Range of Variability (ROV) concept states that ecosystems and landscapes are dynamic in space and time; i.e., that they are in a constant state of change driven by spatial and temporal variability in ecological processes such as disturbance and succession, and therefore that it is most useful to describe ecosystem and landscape characteristics by their ROV rather than just their central tendency. An HRV analysis has been completed for the North Yuba watershed on the Tahoe National Forest. This proposed research component will quantify historic range of variability in the TCSI area, which includes the Eldorado and Tahoe National Forestlands which are the focus of this grant. This project will result in an extended landscape scale for which the HRV is available to public land managers.

The value of this will be to be able to specifically evaluate the relative effects of alternative future management scenarios on landscape structure for the TCSI area specifically and for the Northern and Central Sierra forests in general.

CEQA Compliance: The project is Categorical Exempt under Class 6 Section 15306. Information Collection.

- To access the Notice of Exemption, [click here](#).

Next Steps

Upon approval by the Board, staff will file CEQA Notices of Exemption and Determination and finalize and execute contracts and sub-grant agreements to fulfill obligations of the CalFire CCI Grant agreement. Staff will continue CEQA analysis that

is currently underway. Upon completion of the Draft IS/MND for the King Fire Restoration Project, circulation for public review, and addressing any comments, staff will present a document to the Board for consideration of adoption at a future meeting.

Recommendation

Staff recommends the Board:

(a) authorize the Executive Officer to file Notices of Exemption for the *Planning and Environmental Review* project (R1831015), *French Meadows* project (R1833016), *Landscape-Scale Carbon Accounting* project (CCI005), *Completion of LiDAR on Eldorado National Forest* project (CCI006), and the *HRV Studies in the TCSI Area* project (CCI007); and

(b) make findings that there is no substantial evidence that the *Tobacco Gulch* project (CCI003), with mitigation measures, may have a significant effect on the environment and authorize the Executive Officer to file a Notice of Determination as a Lead Agency on the previously adopted Initial Study / Mitigated Negative Declaration and related Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program; and

(c) authorize staff to enter into all necessary agreements to implement the projects described in this report, pursuant to CAL FIRE - SNC grant agreement 8GG18601.