

Background

For more than six years, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has been actively involved in issues relating to forest and community health. The Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI) was adopted by the SNC Governing Board in 2011 and was endorsed by all 22 Sierra counties, as well as numerous other groups and organizations. It called for parties to work together in a collaborative manner to restore forests to ecological health and improve local communities' social and economic well-being.

As a part of SNFCI's ongoing work, the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council (SNFCI Council) continues to represent a wide range of diverse perspectives unified by the common goals of increasing the pace and scale of restoration of the Sierra Nevada's forests and building healthier ecosystems, economies, and communities in the Sierra Nevada Region. Various forest collaboratives also continue their work to carry out this same mission on the ground in specific watersheds and communities.

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. In July 2015, SNC staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 met with Secretary John Laird and California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) staff, resulting in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that commits the CNRA and USFS Region 5 to a cooperative state/federal collaboration to support the WIP. 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 around current issues and strategies for more effectively implementing the WIP.

Boardmembers Bob Kirkwood and Randy Fletcher serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the WIP effort, and are SNFCI Council members.

Current Status

Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI)

Due to the number of innovative efforts and partnerships underway in the Central Sierra/Tahoe region, SNC has identified the Tahoe-Central Sierra area as a large pilot landscape, with a variety of specific "game-changer" demonstration opportunities in particular watersheds. SNC continues to co-lead and coordinate with the California Tahoe Conservancy working closely with USFS Region 5, the Eldorado and Tahoe national forests, and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. A number of other agency and organization partners are actively engaged, including The Nature Conservancy, the National Forest Foundation, Sagehen Experimental Forest, CAL FIRE, the California Forestry Association, and the University of California. The group is currently pursuing potential funding opportunities and developing a communications plan for the TCSI, with the goal of significantly increasing the pace and scale of restoration activities on the landscape. The effort will also include additional assessment and scientific research to

better inform land management decisions to protect and enhance the many benefits that the landscape provides. Additionally, there are a number of potential opportunities for innovative, watershed-based demonstrations of “new ways to do business” that are at various stages of development, planning, and implementation.

Annual Tahoe Summit

The Annual Tahoe Summit, co-hosted by Senators Dianne Feinstein and Dean Heller, will be held in the Tahoe Basin on August 22 and presents an opportunity to highlight the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative. Staff has been working with TCSI partners to develop materials and messaging for distribution during the Summit.

A Memorandum of Understanding among the partners that captures the intent and commitment of the group to the TCSI was signed prior to the Summit (a copy of this MOU has been included with the Board materials. ([Attachment A](#)) A verbal update on the outcomes of the Summit will be provided at the Board meeting.

WIP Pilot Watersheds

The SNC staff has continued to help develop WIP Pilot Watersheds, which are designed to explore innovative utilization of existing tools and/or testing of new approaches to significantly increase the pace and scale of watershed restoration, with a focus on opportunities in the area of investment, governance, and policy/process improvement. The support of one such effort, the French Meadows Project in the Middle Fork of the American River, is described in [Agenda Item IX](#).

Another area of particular interest is the North Yuba River watershed in the Tahoe National Forest. SNC staff is organizing a meeting in August between the Yuba County Water Agency, the Tahoe National Forest, and SNC to discuss collaborative restoration opportunities in the North Yuba watershed. One of the innovative opportunities there is the piloting of the [Forest Resilience Bond](#) (FRB), which would invest private capital in restoration projects that protect forest health and mitigate wildfire and drought damage risk. If successful, this approach will serve as a new public-private partnership model to enhance climate resilience. SNC staff has been working in close partnership with Blue Forest Conservation (BFC), USFS Region 5, and the Tahoe National Forest in developing this pilot. An MOU between BFC and the USFS Washington Office is currently being finalized.

Blue Forest Conservation is also in discussion with the Sierra National Forest regarding another promising pilot project in the landscape covered by the Dinkey Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act (CFLRA) group, and meeting with the Stanislaus National Forest to evaluate FRB opportunities there.

The TCSI landscape will be the initial geographic focus area for the rollout of the Watershed Information Network, and associated Resilience Dashboard, both of which are described in greater detail later in this report. Lessons learned on this landscape will

be used to refine these tools before they are expanded to other parts of the Sierra Nevada region.

While the TCSI watershed demonstration projects will receive staff and financial support from SNC, efforts will continue at the Regional level to pursue WIP objectives that will benefit the entire Region. This includes 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 WIP.

Watershed Information Network

The staff has been working on the Watershed Information Network (WIN) for the Sierra Nevada WIP. The WIN will provide an online environment to document resources, partners, successes, failures, lessons learned, needs, opportunities, and existing WIP-related efforts. It will offer opportunities to test new ways of integrating the three pillars of the WIP (investment, policy, and infrastructure) in order to restore Sierra Nevada forests to a state of health and resilience.

In March, the SNC launched the initial phase of the WIN, which provides the information and background that set the stage for later phases, and for telling the story of the overall Region. The first phase of the WIN is an enhanced [Restore the Sierra website](#) with new maps (presented in story map format) and messaging about topics such as the shifting baseline conditions in the Sierra and the need for adaptive management. Another in-progress product associated with this phase is a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) map portal, which will provide a user-friendly way to display data to the public.

To date, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has received sixteen Sierra Nevada watershed reports from the Sierra Coordinated Resource Management Council (SCRMC) and participating California Resource Conservation Districts. In addition, the SNC has received similar reports from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and geospatial data from the USFS Region 5. The raw material in the original SCRMC reports has been synthesized and added to the Watershed Information Network (WIN), while the data and trends identified in the reports are being analyzed to identify and map patterns, issues, and projects wherever possible. Much like the SCRMC reports, the BLM documents will be summarized and added to the WIN.

Further, the SNC is working with the USFS Region 5 to analyze and communicate data and maps from the USFS WIP Planned Treatment Summary Dataset, and hoping to complete most of the analysis and map production by the middle of August 2017. In order to meet this deadline, the USFS is first creating custom datasets from the USFS WIP Planned Treatment Summary Dataset, and then using these datasets to create new maps. It is the hope of the SNC and USFS that these maps be disseminated to stakeholders, policy makers, and the public through the SNC's WIN.

At the same time, the SNC is developing four online mapping applications to aggregate the best available and live data as it relates to the Sierra Nevada Region. These maps will be publically available and provide viewers with an understanding of the issues that face the region. The four maps will be organized by theme, which include fire, carbon, water, and habitat.

A key component of the WIN will be the development of a resilience dashboard that will chart progress toward desired future conditions in the Sierra. The staff is in the process of considering the appropriate metrics for such a tool and plans to meet with a variety of partners who have embarked on the development of similar assessments so that we build upon existing efforts rather than re-create a wheel.

Funding Efforts

The SNC staff continues to monitor funding being invested throughout the Sierra Nevada Region, and are developing reports to show where funders are investing their resources on this landscape. These reports will be shared with the SNC Board once they are completed.

The SNC has partnered with the Tahoe Conservancy and USFS Region 5 to apply for approximately five million dollars in landscape-scale restoration funds from the Green House Gas Funds Grant Program administered by CAL FIRE. This funding would complete work on the Tahoe National Forest, the Eldorado National Forest, and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. At the time of drafting this report, CAL FIRE was still evaluating these grant applications, but anticipated announcement of funding decisions in several weeks. An update on status will be provided to the SNC Board at this meeting.

The WIP funding team supports the efforts of the WIP partners by helping them obtain funding for their projects other than (or in addition to) SNC grant funds. The team provides a variety of direct services to these partners, including:

- Timely and user-friendly information about grant opportunities, through regular grant research memos distributed with partners through the website, newsletters, grant notices, and social media.
- Grant writing workshops, organized by and facilitated by SNC staff, designed to build capacity of local partners to successfully apply for funding for their projects.

Recently, SNC also enhanced area staff's ability to search for funding sources on behalf of area partners by training them on ECivis, an online searchable grants resource designed to help partners at the local level.

Next Steps

The SNC hopes to leverage the momentum from the Tahoe Summit to continue to work to develop and implement funding, demonstration projects, and a communications strategy for the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative as the landscape for the initial WIP Pilot Watershed efforts. SNC staff will also continue to collaborate on the Forest Resilience Bond (FRB)

effort in various coordination, development, and support roles as the Yuba Project is further refined and implemented, and other potential pilot FRB sites are identified.

The SNC staff will continue the development of the Resilience Dashboard and the Watershed Improvement Network (WIN). As the final components of the WIP assessments are completed, they will be integrated into the WIN, as well as WIP messaging designed to more clearly quantify watershed restoration needs in the Sierra Nevada.

The SNC staff also will continue to work in a variety of active roles in several task forces and teams to move WIP objectives forward, including but not limited to the Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force; the Forest Climate Action Team, a team working on the implementation of the Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding; and the Sierra LiDAR Cooperative Discussion Group. Staff will also further its work in the four key areas of Policy, Funding, Communications, and Restoration Implementation. Staff will provide regular updates to the Board as to progress in the development and implementation 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.