

SIERRA NEVADA  
CONSERVANCY



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Terrence O'Brien, *Governing Board Chair*

Angela Avery, *Executive Officer*

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Cover photography: creek and surrounding forest near Foresthill in El Dorado County, California.

*The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency with the mission to initiate, encourage, and support efforts to improve the environmental, economic, and social well-being of the Sierra Nevada Region, its communities, and the citizens of California.*



# Letter from the Executive Officer

This past year marked the 15th anniversary of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC). It also marked the end to one of the most destructive wildfire decades in history.

Nearly two million acres burned in the last 10 years on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada and much of it at a severity never before seen. The 2018 Camp Fire that burned 70,000 acres and most of the towns of Magalia, Concow, and Paradise in just one day is a stark reminder of how destructive—and deadly—a wildfire can be.

With a whopping 119 million dead trees in the Sierra Nevada (three dead trees for every Californian) and a wildfire season that is now 78 days longer than during the 1970s, 2019 was certainly the time to stop talking about forest health and community resilience and start taking action.

Fortunately, California and the SNC responded.

At the state level, Governor Gavin Newsom continued his predecessor's focus on safeguarding natural resources and communities in the wildland-urban interface by issuing an executive order on his first full day in office calling for urgent action to reduce wildfire risk in and around California's most vulnerable communities. As a result of that executive order, 35 priority fuel-reduction projects were identified for immediate implementation to help reduce the public safety risk for wildfire. A third of these projects were in the Sierra Nevada Region.

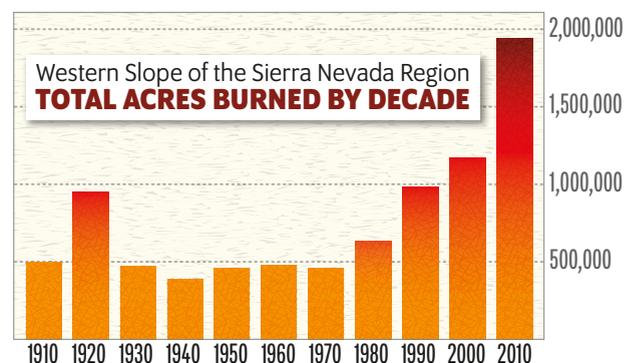
At the SNC, significant actions continued to restore resilience in the Sierra Nevada and help California meet its climate goals. We awarded \$36 million to 62 projects in just the past 12 months. We expanded the scope of our work under the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement

Program (WIP) to reflect the holistic intent of our mission by developing funding programs to support vibrant recreation and tourism, resilient Sierra Nevada communities, and strategic land conservation, while still supporting forest and watershed health. We also added new, experienced members to our talented staff, which leaves us poised to build on our recent successes.

Looking to 2020 and beyond, our vision at the SNC is clear.

We must build on the momentum and achievements of 2019. That, essentially, means strengthening and expanding our WIP projects, to ensure landscape-wide restoration efforts transcend jurisdictions to address the true scale of the climate challenges we face. Through partnerships and collaborations, we can effectively and efficiently restore forest health, enhance community safety, and boost economic vitality throughout the Sierra Nevada and the State of California.

This year may have marked the end to one of the most destructive wildfire decades in history, but, by continuing to work together in these meaningful ways, the days ahead hold great promise for a more resilient Sierra Nevada.



*More acres have burned this decade than any prior decade.*

# 2019 Funding Activities

GROWING TO MEET THE DEMAND

Through the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP), the SNC funds projects that improve the resilience of Sierra Nevada watersheds and communities in the face of a changing climate. This year, bond funds from **Proposition 68** helped the SNC fund more work, and a state-funded block grant launched the WIP Capacity Program.

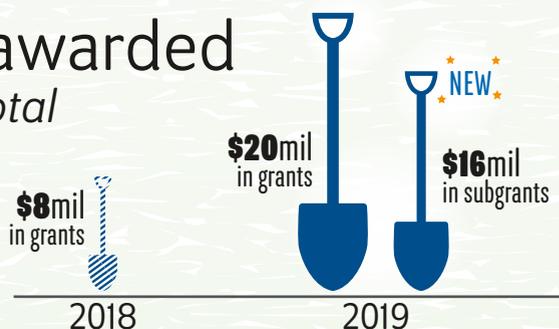
**\$67 million total funds**  
managed by SNC in 2019

New projects: \$36 million  
Active projects: \$27 million  
Closed out projects: \$4 million

## FUNDING MORE WORK

**\$36mil** awarded  
*62 projects total*

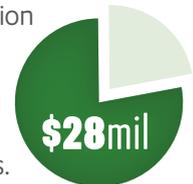
We more than  
**QUADRUPLED**  
the funding we  
awarded last year.



## IMPROVING FOREST RESILIENCE

Healthy forests are key to achieving resilience in the Sierra Nevada and vital for California's **climate adaptation** strategy.

Of the \$36 million we awarded, \$28 million fund forest health projects.



WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?



### Fuels Reduction

Reduce overcrowding through mechanical & hand **thinning** and **prescribed fire**.



### Post-fire Recovery

Restoration after destructive wildfires by clearing dead trees and replanting.

## EXTENDING FOCUS *beyond forest health*



### forest health

Our priority, the foundation for holistic watershed health.



**community resilience**



**land conservation**



**recreation & tourism**

We extended funding to three areas that are closely linked with forest health.

## EXPANDING CAPACITY

We launched the **WIP CAPACITY PROGRAM** upon receiving a \$2 million block grant from the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program.



The WIP Capacity Program will focus on project planning and prioritization. This will prepare projects for funding to get work on the ground faster.

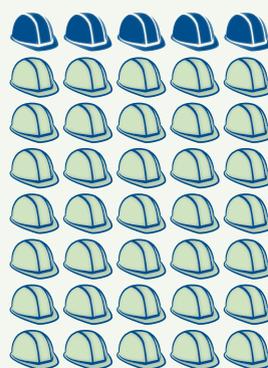
# Regional Partnerships and Knowledge

Home to roughly 600,000 residents and millions of visitors each year, this rugged, rural region also contains half the state's carbon supply and a majority of its wildlife diversity, while providing most of its water. Managing this incredible landscape to optimize the environmental benefits while also building community resilience and economic vitality is a complex but critical task.

Navigating the complexity of multiple landowner land management arrangements in the Sierra Nevada while encouraging efforts that support broader state goals takes trust, experience, and a solid network of partners. Since its inception, the SNC has been building partnerships between state, federal, and local agencies, tribes, and non-governmental organizations. Those partnerships have led to locally informed multi-benefit projects across jurisdictions that protect and restore the region for the benefit of all Californians.

## Collaboration

The SNC has spent the last several years engaged in collaboratives to share knowledge and forge partnerships that increase the Region's capacity to work together.



The SNC has spearheaded 5 collaborative groups and participates in another 30. These groups focus heavily on forest and watershed health and project planning across the region.

## SIERRA NEVADA WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (WIP)

In 2015, the SNC took collaboration and partnership to a landscape scale by launching the WIP. Through the WIP, partners from the federal, state, county, local, and private sectors are joining together to create new approaches for addressing environmental and economic threats to the Sierra Nevada. The WIP was signed into law in 2018 because of its holistic approach to supporting projects that fulfill multiple local needs while helping the state meet its climate goals.





# WIP Project Stories

In this changing climate, the Sierra Nevada faces many daunting challenges. Through the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP), the SNC funds and manages projects that directly and effectively mitigate these risks. Restoring forest health is key to environmental well-being, but it's also the foundation for community safety and resilience. It can also boost local, rural economies.

The WIP is collaborative by design, based on the SNC's experience that the most effective projects are driven by local needs and informed by local expertise. The three projects below highlight the holistic nature of SNC's focus and investments—and illustrate the many benefits generated by our partners' work throughout our critical 25-million-acre region.

## POCKETS OF PROTECTION NEAR PARADISE: Little Butte Creek Forest Health Projects

*Fuels reduction work done around the Pine Ridge School (below) allowed firefighters to protect it from the Camp Fire. Across the road (bottom of next page), where no work was done, are empty residential lots that burned in the fire.*

**Source:** Propositions 84 & 1

**Amount:** \$962,793 (3 grants total)

**Recipient:** Butte County Fire Safe Council

**Partners:** U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Paradise Irrigation District, Paradise Unified School District, Paradise Pines Property Owners Assoc.

The devastating Camp Fire killed 85 people and burned nearly 154,000 acres, including much of the towns of Concow, Magalia, and Paradise. Yet, among the scorched landscape, in areas where the SNC-funded projects thinned dense forests prior to the deadly blaze, neighborhoods and vital infrastructure still stand and pockets of green trees continue to grow.

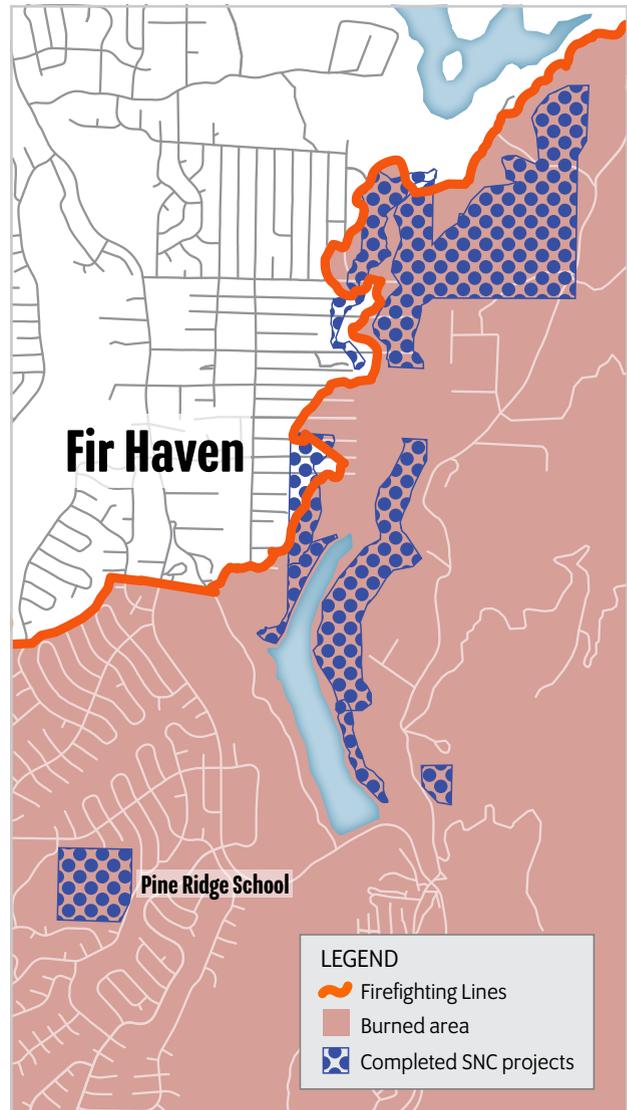


“When you drive for miles through blackened, burned trees and then arrive in a thinning project area full of green-tree tops, you know that these efforts are worth it, we are having success and we can make a difference together,” said Calli-Jane DeAnda, Executive Director of the Butte County Fire Safe Council.

These locally driven forest health projects near Magalia that were supported by the SNC did more than just save trees, they saved community structures.

“As the fire hit the fuel-reduction work, the fire behavior moderated and, instead of burning through the tree canopy, it predominantly became a ground fire burning at a lower intensity,” said David Hawks, CAL FIRE Unit Chief for Butte County. “When the fire did cross the drainage it wasn’t so intense and firefighters were able to pick it up and get on it, which has a lot to do with why that Fir Haven community as a whole was largely spared.”

The Pine Ridge School stands unburnt surrounded by a ring of blackened, empty lots. “That school was only spared because of the fuel-reduction work that was completed a few months before the fire. The fire behavior moderated in the forested area on school property and firefighters were able to get in there and save the school,” said Hawks.



*Project work completed before the Camp Fire helped protect the Fir Haven community. The thinned forests moderated the fire's behavior and provided firefighters with an entry point to hold off the blaze.*

These small victories were won through the heroic actions of firefighting crews, but also because of the earlier work that took place to clear unhealthy, overcrowded forests of the area. Forest restoration projects around communities in the Sierra Nevada wildland-urban interface (WUI) are critical and they remain a focus of the SNC in order to save vital community assets and lives.

“Without grant projects like these from the SNC, the overall ability to protect forests, infrastructure, and people would be reduced drastically,” DeAnda concluded.

## A PRESCRIPTION FOR RESILIENT WILDERNESS: North Feather River Headwaters Forest Restoration Project

**Source:** Proposition 1

**Amount:** \$494,783

**Recipient:** Sierra Institute for Community & Environment

**Partners:** Lassen Volcanic National Park

**Status:** Completed November 2019

The plan is to use “good” fire to help protect natural and cultural resources within Lassen Volcanic National Park.



Before officials can use low- and medium-intensity prescribed fire, also known as “good” fire, on the 1,600-acre Flatiron Ridge adjacent to the historic Drakesbad Guest Ranch, they first needed to reduce high fuel loads and prepare firelines along the Pacific Crest and Kelly Camp trails.

The location within the boundary of the Lassen Volcanic Wilderness made this project very unique since the use of machinery, like masticators and chainsaws, is not allowed within a congressionally designated wilderness. The park used hand tools like the crosscut saw to clear excessive woody biomass that has built up due to years of fire suppression. Thankfully, with SNC funding, the Sierra Institute was able to hire a crew interested in learning how to utilize these “old school” forestry implements.

“This was a unique opportunity to recruit a talented group of men and women that are developing into an important workforce to support wilderness fuels reduction,” said Kyle Rodgers, Collaborative Forestry Program Manager at the Sierra Institute.

“Their skill set by the end of the season was unparalleled. They were working just as quickly and cost-effectively as a chainsaw crew,” said Steven Buckley, ecologist, botanist, and project manager at the Lassen Volcanic National Park.

“It was truly an incredible endeavor,” added Buckley, who applauded the SNC for having the trust and foresight to support a fuels-reduction project in a Wilderness area that must rely on historic forestry methods.

“Without the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, none of this happens,” said Buckley. “This project would be just another good idea rather than

*Completing fuels reduction work in designated wilderness areas poses an equipment challenge. Machinery like masticators and chainsaws, which are standard forest restoration tools, are not allowed.*



*Returning to "old school" forestry techniques—the crew shows off its crosscut saws and axes, the only tools they were permitted to use in the Lassen Volcanic Wilderness.*

an innovative proof of concept for how to manage our wildlands. Only with SNC and their willingness to experiment and try something new does this work get done."

## **A COUNTY LIFELINE PROTECTED:** **Lyons-South Fork Watershed Forest Resilience Project**

**Source:** Proposition 1

**Amount:** \$496,000

**Recipient:** Tuolumne Utilities District

**Partners:** Stanislaus National Forest, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), Sierra Pacific Industries, Highway 108 Fire Safe Council, Tuolumne Rancheria Fire Dept. (Me-Wuk Indians)

**Status:** Completed December 2019

The Tuolumne Main Canal, which was built more than 150 years ago during the Gold Rush, serves water to nearly 90 percent of Tuolumne County's residents. After an inspection revealed

the critical aqueduct was extremely vulnerable to wildfire, area officials rushed to put a plan together to protect it.

"We did a study to take a look at what would happen if parts of the flume burned down," said Lisa Westbrook, public relations coordinator for the Tuolumne Utilities District. "In the case of the first section, just below Lyons Reservoir, we discovered it could take up to 500 days to repair."

District representatives and interested stakeholders shared their urgent desire to thin the overcrowded forests surrounding this eight-mile canal, which contains eleven sections of wooden flumes.

The SNC funded the project, which cleared ladder fuels and reduced canopy cover on 200 acres within the Stanislaus National Forest.

"The SNC has been awesome," said Westbrook. "It has helped us so much through the process. It took longer than we expected because the area

is so steep, but we were all on board to complete the necessary mastication and canopy reduction.”

Getting into some of those rugged areas was only possible because of the incredible hand-thinning work by the Tuolumne Rancheria Fire Department of the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians, said Westbrook. Only with their help, and the efforts and support of all the private and public landowners where the canal traverses, was this unique endeavor possible, she added.

“We had such a great partnership,” added Westbrook. “We are all very hopeful that this project will protect this vital water source and the greater community.”

*This historic flume system below Lyons Reservoir serves water to 90% of Tuolumne County.*



# BOARD MEMBERS

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**Terrence O'Brien**, Public Member  
*Governor's Appointment*

## California Natural Resources Agency

**Wade Crowfoot**, Secretary

**Jennifer Montgomery**, Director of the  
Governor's Forest Management Task Force  
*Designee for the Secretary*

## Department of Finance

**Keely Martin Bosler**, Director

**Gayle Miller**, Chief Deputy of Policy  
*Designee for the Director*

## Local Government Appointments

**Mary Rickert**, Shasta County Supervisor  
*Northern Sierra Representative (Alternate:  
Elizabeth Cavasso, Modoc County Supervisor)*

**Paul Roen**, Sierra County Supervisor  
*North Central Sierra Representative*

**Richard Anderson**, Nevada County Supervisor  
*Central Sierra Representative*

**Sherri Brennan**, Tuolumne County Supervisor  
*South Central Sierra Representative*

**Tom Wheeler**, Madera County Supervisor  
*Southern Sierra Representative*

**Stacy Corless**, Mono County Supervisor  
*Eastern Sierra Representative*



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## Governor's Appointments

**John Brissenden**, Public Member

**Danny Wan**, Public Member

## Legislative Appointments

**Bob Johnston**

*Senate Rules Committee Appointee*

**Susana Reyes**

*Speaker of the Assembly Appointee*

## Non-Voting Liaison Advisors

**Barnie Gyant**, U.S. Forest Service  
*U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's Appointee*

**Jim Richardson**, National Park Service  
*U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Appointee*

**Este Stifel**, Bureau of Land Management  
*U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Appointee*

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