



## Board Meeting Minutes

September 7, 2023 – South Subregion – Kernville, CA

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### **Board Meeting**

*Johnny McNally's Fairview Lodge  
7300 Kern River Highway  
Kernville, CA 93238*

#### **1. Call to Order**

The meeting was called to order at 9:01 a.m.

#### **2. Oath of Office for New Boardmembers**

Board Chair Terry O'Brien administered the Oath of Office to the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) Designee, Lisa Lien-Mager, and Speaker of the Assembly Appointee, Victoria Rome.

#### **3. Roll Call**

Present:

- Terry O'Brien
- Heather Bernikoff
- John Brissenden
- Lisa Lien-Mager
- Jeff Griffiths
- Michele Perrault
- Phillip Peters – arrived at 9:16 a.m.
- Jim Richardson
- Victoria Rome
- Ed Valenzuela

Absent:

- Liz Berger
- Dwight Ceresola
- Cindy Gustafson
- Brian Oneto
- Christopher Heppe
- Bob Johnston

#### **4. Approval of June 1, 2023, Meeting Minutes (ACTION)**

This item was moved to the December Board meeting due to a lack of a quorum.

##### **Public Comment**

There was no public comment.

##### **Action**

No action was taken at this time, approval of the June 1, 2023, Meeting Minutes will take place at the December 8, 2023, meeting.

#### **5. Board Chair's Report**

Board Chair Terry O'Brien announced the last meeting of National Park Service Boardmember Jim Richardson and thanked him for his service on the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) Board. Chair O'Brien also announced the departure of two valued Boardmembers; CNRA designee Jessica Morse and Assembly Speaker Appointment Susana Reyes.

Chair O'Brien recognized Area Representative Ben Barry who organized the informative tour provided the previous day. Chair O'Brien expressed gratitude for the benefits of a wet winter, which benefited the state and mitigated the negative effects of drought.

#### **6. Executive Officer's Report (INFORMATIONAL)**

##### **a. Executive Officer Update**

Executive Officer Angela Avery thanked Area Representative Ben Barry for his work coordinating the Board tour, thanked the speakers who traveled to the area to present on tour topics, and recognized the venue hosts of Johnny McNally's. Avery continued by welcoming the new Boardmembers and expressing gratitude to departing National Park Service Boardmember Jim Richardson.

Avery provided the Board with a brief legislative update regarding Senate Bill (SB) 39 (Dahle), and SB 841 (Dahle), a second boundary expansion bill, which would add an additional four million acres to the SNC boundary. Avery noted that staff are monitoring budget conversations, other state legislative activities and the status of a possible state bond.

Avery reported that because of the unknown future of state funding, SNC continues to look for partnership opportunities with the federal government. Avery shared that two new Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) concepts were submitted to the United States Forest Service (USFS) Washington office in August. The Eldorado National Forest concept is a \$20 million GNA proposal for forest restoration work to be spent over a five-year period. This GNA would also amplify the work being done as part of the SNC's Landscape Grant Pilot Program. The second concept is for work in Sequoia and Lassen national forests to test the implementation of USFS General Technical Report 270. The second GNA proposal is for a total of \$10 million. Avery stated that staff will continue to update the Board on the status of these GNAs.

Chair O'Brien emphasized the importance of providing input on projects being approved in Washington at the federal level.

Avery updated the Board on the status of planning for the March 2024 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit and Celebration. Avery asked Boardmembers to share any input they might have and thanked staff for their work planning the event.

Philip Peters joined at 9:16 a.m.

b. Administrative Update

Deputy Executive Officer, Administration, Amy Lussier provided the Board with an overview of administrative activities. Lussier announced two new SNC employees: Chelsea Froome and Tori Weber. Froome supports the Executive Team and Weber provides Executive and Board support services.

Lussier informed the Board that the Department of General Services (DGS) required all departments to conduct operational reviews to assess current working arrangements and assess management metrics that ensure program and policy outcomes are met. The SNC's review was completed and submitted in August. Review of the results demonstrated the success of SNC's approach to the hybrid workplace. The SNC received positive feedback from staff on work-life balance.

Lussier continued with a budget update, highlighting that SNC fully spent its Fiscal Year (FY) 2022-23 Environmental License Plate Fund (ELPF) appropriation. Lussier reported that \$4 million in reimbursements in FY 2022-23 will be received once all invoicing is final, with \$3.27 million applied toward projects in the Region. Lussier briefed the Board on the FY 2023-24 budget, including General Fund appropriation changes and reimbursement authorizations. Lussier emphasized that Administrative staff continue to consider SNC's future financial health when making budget and expenditures decisions and regularly meet with the Executive Team on this topic.

c. Policy & Outreach Update

Policy and Outreach Division Chief Brittany Covich shared a PowerPoint update for the Board on legislative bills being tracked by SNC staff. Covich added to Avery's state climate bond update stating that there are several bonds being considered. Covich also discussed:

- Assembly Bill (AB) 338 (Aguiar-Curry): This bill would require prevailing wage payments for forest-health work. This bill is in its third reading on the floor, while some amendments have been made to lessen the impacts on tribes and smaller contracts, the Region is still expecting significant impacts should this bill pass and be signed.
- AB 388 (Connolly): This bill would direct CAL FIRE to develop guidelines for landscape investment strategies. This bill was held in appropriations, but SNC will continue to track this bill as it could be helpful in advancing the SNC Landscape Investment Strategy.

Boardmembers engaged in conversation around bond funding and expectations.

Covich also provided a communications update highlighting two CNRA events that Elliott Vander Kolk and Angie Avery both participated in. Avery presented at the June Secretary Speaker Series on 30x30 and Outdoor Access for All. Avery's presentation focused on recent SNC grant awards that would return ancestral lands to tribes. Vander Kolk participated in a Rim Fire panel that looked at the impacts of the Rim Fire ten years later, sharing the successes of some of the projects. Both events had exposure and are posted online for future views. Covich said SNC is appreciative of the opportunities provided by CNRA to present on the work.

Covich highlighted several field events the SNC participated in:

- Water Education Foundation Headwaters Tour: Covich participated in this tour for water managers as a resource speaker. Covich reported that for some of the participants, this was their first exposure to the headwaters, and this tour highlighted several projects SNC has supported.
- Meadows Tour sponsored by Plumas Corp. and the SNC: SNC Regional Scientist Sarah Campe attended this tour for legislative staff on the overall benefits of healthy and restored meadows.
- Fire Science Retreat: Campe attended this annual retreat that brings together staff from CAL FIRE, California Air Resources Board, and various academic affiliations, along with other science-focused staff, who are helping to inform state forest and wildfire policy.
- Legislative Staff Tour with the Nevada Irrigation District (NID): This tour featured projects the SNC funded in partnership with the NID in Nevada County. Covich stated the tour had good attendance with staff from the Assembly Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee, Legislative Analyst's Office, Assembly Member Arambula's Office, Assembly Natural Resources Committee, CNRA, Legislative Affairs, and Senator Laird's Office.

Covich presented two other events featured in the Key Meetings and Conference document provided in the staff materials.

Covich highlighted several upcoming events, including the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) Summit where participants will be celebrating the SNC's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

d. Field Operations & Grants Update

Field Operations & Grants (FO&G) Division Chief Andy Fristensky provided the Board with a division update stating that over the past 20 years the SNC has approved 619 grants totaling more than \$240 million. Fristensky continued that in the past two years, the General Fund grants that have been authorized funded over 100 projects with over \$100 million. Fristensky also pointed out SNC has over 175 active grants with over \$133 million being implemented, which means the FO&G division has seen a significant shift in grant-management workload.

Fristensky stated programs are often oversubscribed, with the latest program receiving 51 concept proposals totaling just under \$94 million dollars while only \$37 million is available.

Fristensky noted there have been benefits to a hybrid workplace outside of the organization. Virtual participation in collaborative meetings throughout the Region is possible without long drive times.

Fristensky also reported to the Board that the FO&G team has been reviewing workload and area representation for the new Subregion structure and these recommendations were taken forward to the executive staff for consideration.

Fristensky talked about FO&G strategic planning for the team and summarized some of the obstacles the group is facing. Fristensky also addressed Boardmember concerns and provided potential proposed solutions and ideas.

## **7. Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program Update (INFORMATIONAL)**

Policy & Outreach Division Chief Brittany Covich provided a PowerPoint presentation with an update on the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP). This presentation included a brief history of the Department of Conservation's (DOC) RFFCP objectives and SNC's role as a Regional Block Grantee to the DOC. Covich reviewed grant round funding received by the SNC (Round 1: \$1.9 million; Round 2: \$7.77 million; Round 3: \$14.5 million), reviewed the "Pathways to a Landscape Grant" illustration (included in Board materials), and gave an investments and outcomes to-date summary.

Covich summarized projects funded to date and directed Boardmembers to their Board materials for a detailed list of first round funding. Covich continued that the second round of funding focused on grantees that had not received funding in the past, with a small number of tribal and demonstration projects.

Covich highlighted several program outcomes resulting from the first two rounds of RFFCP funding (\$9 million). These outcomes included 23 new permanent positions for organizations doing forest and fuel-reduction projects across the Region, 24 new partnerships developed, expanded engagement across 34 others, planning and permitting completed on nearly 385,000 acres across all 24 counties within the Region, five new projects brought to shovel readiness, and \$106 million in leveraged funding.

Round three goals will build upon the work that was done in the first two rounds, plus integrate what has been learned about developing a collaboration ready for landscape funding. Specific goals include broadening and strengthening

collaboratives and entities throughout the Region to develop the capacity to engage in landscape-scale or suites of community-protection projects.

Covich stated that round three funding will be distributed as it has been in the past through directed grants. Funding components include capacity investments to support organizational growth, project-pipeline development, and a tribal capacity-building pilot program.

Covich also reviewed SNC's responsibilities as a Regional block grantee. These responsibilities include developing and administering the subgrant program, supporting subgrant organizations throughout the process, overseeing communications throughout the Region on the process, packaging program statistics, and developing a Regional priority plan that will be presented to the Board in the future.

Covich provided a review of next steps, which included the current assessment of capacity and project-pipeline development needs, identifying and recommending subgrants, and executing approved subgrants with work beginning in December 2023 to January 2024. Covich stated that round three funding updates will be provided to the Board at the March 2024 meeting.

Boardmembers engaged in conversation around budgeting, return on investment, and tribal government and tribal-led nonprofit percentages as part of the positions-created outcome numbers.

## **8. Strategic Planning Update (INFORMATIONAL)**

Chief Deputy Executive Officer Julie Alvis provided the Board with a PowerPoint presentation reviewing the SNC Strategic Planning process. This presentation included a review of the current Strategic Plan, the development process used in the past, and an overview of SNC's current five Regional Goals.

Alvis reviewed the timeline for the new five-year (2024-2029) Strategic Plan. Alvis emphasized the first draft of the Strategic Plan is being developed from now until November 2023, with a draft due to the Board at the December 2023 Board meeting. The final draft of the 2024-2029 Strategic Plan will be presented to the Board at the March or June 2024 Board meeting.

Alvis told the Board the current Strategic Plan will serve as a foundation for developing the new plan. Alvis shared initial thoughts stating that the Plan should align with state goals, incorporate the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Plan

(WIP), and fall within the SNC's mission and the existing SNC authorities as a state department. Alvis also emphasized the Plan should support the triple bottom line: economic, environmental, and social well-being, and assist in achieving state goals, while reflecting Regional and local perspectives and needs.

Alvis highlighted the opportunity to call out other work SNC does beyond the providing local assistance grants to the Region.

Alvis outlined areas where focus may be needed, revisiting the five Regional Goals, which may help inform broadening old definitions.

Alvis continued by saying that an SNC workplan will be developed and SNC is currently considering the use of the statewide organizational process referred to as Objectives and Key Results (OKRs).

Alvis outlined areas identified needing refinement. These areas included the new SNC boundary, addressing new statutes concerning Subregional alignment, and the addition of equity and climate resilience to SNC's focus areas.

Alvis discussed next steps for development of the Strategic Plan, which include a survey of partners regarding Regional Goals, internal discussions about the SNC work plan, and development of a Board advisory committee.

Boardmembers engaged in conversation around the Strategic Plan. Specific questions from the Board around the five Regional Goals were addressed and the idea of urgency was requested to be incorporated in the new Plan.

Boardmembers Heather Bernikoff and John Brissenden volunteered to serve on the Strategic Planning Advisory Committee.

## **9. Southern Sierra-Giant Sequoia Science Presentation (INFORMATIONAL)**

A panel of scientists working in the southern Sierra presented the status and health of giant sequoia ecosystems. Panel members included Dr. Christy Brigham, Chief of Resources Management and Science at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks; Dr. Mark Meyer, Ecologist with the USFS Pacific Southwest Regional Ecology Program serving the National Inyo and Sequoia Forests; and Dr. Adrian Dass, Ecologist with the United States Geological Survey Western Ecological Research Center stationed at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.



The panel answered several questions related to the present state of the southern Sierra and giant sequoias and their understanding of how the vulnerability of the giant sequoia has shifted over the past decade.

Dr. Brigham shared that the Park is in the early stages of a prolonged hot drought and tree die-off is noticeable. Climate change impacts on the landscape that were expected decades in the future are happening in the present.

Brigham noted that giant sequoias are incredibly old and resilient trees, but the drought is causing widespread foliage die-back, and cedar bark beetles are killing trees. Some giant sequoias died in high-severity fire, so attention was being paid to that, then the 2020-21 fires hit, with devastating consequences.

Brigham emphasized that the southern Sierra is experiencing climate change more acutely than the rest of the Region, noting that SNC is a frontrunner in this arena and needs science to help understand what happened, why it happened, and how to stop it from happening again.

Brigham also said that the gift of the fires is that they served as a wake-up call to attract funding and investment. They were also a gift because, despite the devastation of the 2020-21 fires, there was a vast amount of acreage that burned “well.” The science community should leverage what is essentially a first-entry treatment to move these forests into a more resilient state.

Brigham thanked the SNC for funding projects and attracting key partners to the southern Sierra.

Dr. Adrian Doss talked about ways research priorities have changed based on recent events. He said the level of urgency has ramped up. Researchers 10-15 years ago noted that background rates of tree mortality had more than doubled in a couple of decades, which was cause for concern. As scientists and managers were working to understand and address that, the drought hit, and mortality rates increased exponentially.

Doss noted that climate change means the past is not a place we can go back to, so going forward, the question is how we think about managing for the future. Scientists at USGS are focused on drivers of forest change and building vulnerability models.

Doss also said we are now also looking at postfire landscapes – trying to understand what happened and why. There is an immediate need to understand the trajectory of

post-fire landscapes, rates of regeneration, the need for re-entry burns, etc., and all of it needs to be thought about in the context of climate change. A science-management nexus is the key for doing things well. No single group can answer these questions; we need to have networks and learn from each other.

Dr. Marc Meyer talked about the make-up of a productive science-management partnership noting that science-management partnerships can be diverse and should capitalize on local expertise and negotiate differing opinions. It's extraordinarily difficult to make decisions in the face of so much uncertainty, so integrating the perspectives and knowledge of diverse entities is critical.

SNC Boardmembers engaged in discussion with panel members.

#### **10. Boardmembers' Comments**

Boardmember Jim Richardson provided supporting comments related to the science panel information provided. Richardson spoke about trust in land-management agencies throughout the Region.

#### **11. Public Comments**

There was no public comment.

#### **12. Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 12:26 p.m.