



Sierra Nevada Conservancy

2024–2029

STRATEGIC PLAN

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Cover: Windy Point, Placer County. *Photography: Joseph Dondelinger.*

OVERVIEW

This Strategic Plan (Plan) will guide the operations of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) for five years (2024–2029). This Plan is primarily intended as an internal guidance document for the SNC’s Governing Board (Board), leadership team, and staff. If necessary, the Board may act to make changes to this Plan prior to the scheduled update based on changing circumstances, new developments, and available resources.

This Plan represents the Board’s direction regarding Regional goals and objectives, external and internal strategies to achieve those goals, and how we will measure progress. As the Board guides the SNC throughout the planning period, this document can serve as a signpost to help ensure that decision-making advances a cohesive, vetted, and strategic set of intentions and actions.



Conway Summit, Mono County.

Because it represents direction from the Board, the Plan will inform SNC operations and support the leadership team in making programmatic decisions and prioritizing staff time and the use of other resources. This Plan can also support and inform staff in its work and communications about the SNC. Staff, and particularly new hires, should look to the Plan for clarity and guidance on the SNC’s focus, Regional and organizational goals, and its way of doing business in the Region.

The goals identified in this Plan are the SNC’s north stars for the next five years. The Plan’s implementation will require both internal focus and ongoing collaboration with partners within and beyond the Region. The SNC intends to advance the Plan’s goals through the strategies identified herein. Separate annual Action Plans, approved by the SNC’s Board, will identify how each division will execute these strategies and move the SNC toward achieving its objectives (see “[Accountability](#)” at the end of this document).

Purpose

As the 2024–2029 Plan for the SNC, the purpose of this document is to identify the SNC’s priorities over the next five years, lay out the strategies and high-level actions that will advance those priorities, and communicate how this work meets Sierra-Cascade Regional needs and state priorities.

Building resilience for the landscapes and communities of the Region is at the heart of everything the SNC does. This Plan is intended to guide the way for the SNC to pursue that purpose in all its work across the Region. Ultimately, work under this Plan strives to achieve SNC’s vision, while working within the focus of its mission.

Vision: California’s magnificent Sierra-Cascade Region offers outstanding environmental, economic, and social health with vibrant, resilient communities and landscapes sustained for future generations.

Mission: The SNC’s mission is to initiate, encourage, and support efforts that improve the environmental, economic, and social well-being of California’s Sierra-Cascade Region, its communities, and the people of the state.

The Region has experienced dramatic changes in recent years. Responding to the accelerating impacts of climate change on human and natural communities—and the emergence of feedback cycles between climate stressors and other ecological and socioeconomic conditions—will be central to the SNC’s work over the next five years. So, too, will be efforts to create more equitable access to, and outcomes from, the environmental, social, and economic benefits of the Region. Given recent disasters and the likelihood of more in the future, supporting vulnerable communities in building resilience is more important than ever.

Despite challenges, the Region comes into this planning period following several years of significant momentum and resources. As the Region’s profile (and needs) has grown, it has received unprecedented state and federal investment. Simultaneously, community leaders and organizations have made remarkable strides in developing their own capacity to tackle local challenges. Through this Plan, the SNC is committed to help the Region maintain and build on this momentum.

This Plan represents the SNC’s best assessment of the Region’s needs and priorities at this moment in time. As demonstrated over the past five years, things can change quickly. When they do, plans must change too. This Plan reflects a working set of priorities and offers a framework for action. Its purpose is to provide guidance and direction, while preserving flexibility as new circumstances arise. Listening closely and responding quickly are core to the SNC’s identity; that will not change.

Finally, this Plan is intended to identify, reflect, and strengthen connections to community priorities and broader statewide initiatives, ensuring the SNC works cooperatively with partners at all scales. Community leadership, coordinated action, and a commitment to partnership have always guided the SNC’s work. By continuing to embrace these practices, the SNC hopes to catalyze and contribute to positive outcomes far greater than what could be achieved alone.

Our Charge

The SNC is a California state agency created by bipartisan legislation (Laird-Leslie Sierra Nevada Conservancy Act) signed into law in 2004. The statute that created the SNC emphasizes the importance of carrying out its mission in a collaborative and cooperative manner, while also establishing the role that the SNC plays in bringing resources to the Region. ([Public Resources Code, sections 33300 to 33356](#)).

The SNC’s enabling statute identifies 10 areas of work the SNC can contribute to. (Public Resources Code, section 33301, subdivision (d).) As written in state law, those areas are:

- (1) Provide increased opportunity for tourism and recreation.
- (2) Protect, conserve, and restore the region’s diverse physical, cultural, archaeological, historical, and living resources.
- (3) Aid in the preservation of working landscapes.
- (4) Reduce the risk of natural disasters, such as wildfire.
- (5) Protect and improve water and air quality.
- (6) Assist the regional economy through the operation of the conservancy’s program.
- (7) Identify the highest priority projects and initiatives for which funding is needed.
- (8) Undertake efforts to enhance public use and enjoyment of lands owned by the public.
- (9) Support efforts that advance both environmental preservation and the economic well-being of Sierra residents in a complementary manner.
- (10) Support efforts that advance climate resilience and equity.

The final charge in this list—advancing climate resilience and equity—was added to the SNC’s scope of work following legislation in 2023. The SNC embraces this addition as the codification of an existing organizational priority. This legislation also expanded the list of the SNC’s cooperators to better reflect current partners, including “local governments, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, tribal entities, federal agencies, other California state governmental entities, and the public.” (Public Resources Code, section 33301, subdivision (d).)



Mount Shasta, Siskiyou County.

Other recent statutory revisions have brought more significant changes to the SNC for this strategic planning period. In 2021, Senate Bill 208 expanded the boundary of the Region served by the SNC to include a greater portion of Shasta County and portions of two new counties: Siskiyou and Trinity. This expansion added approximately 1.3 million acres to the SNC's service area, bringing the total land area to 26,937,668 acres.

As a result of this expansion, the [SNC's service area](#)—stretching from Modoc County in the north, to Trinity County in the west, to Kern County in the south—

covers nearly 27 million acres and all or part of 24 counties. Comprising approximately 25 percent of California's total land area, it is one of the largest conservancy regions in the state. The SNC's service area has always included the mountains and foothills of the Sierra Nevada range, the Mono Basin, Owens Valley, the Modoc Plateau, the western edge of the Great Basin, and part of the southern Cascade Range, including the Pit River watershed. Following the boundary expansion, the Region also encompasses the McCloud River, Upper Sacramento River, and Upper Trinity River watersheds. All the upper forested watersheds that feed the California State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project are now within the SNC service area.

The 2023 legislation also revised the boundaries of the SNC Subregions and its Boardmember rotation to reflect the addition of Siskiyou and Trinity counties. The SNC's service area continues to have six Subregions, and each Subregion now has four counties. Area representatives continue to work in-person in assigned counties, while the SNC headquarters remains in Auburn, Ca.

Lake Isabella, Kern County.



PLAN CONTEXT

This Plan is grounded in the geographic, ecological, and socioeconomic conditions of the Sierra-Cascade Region. Some facets of this Regional context reflect enduring characteristics of the Region, while others are new or have evolved significantly in recent years. Additionally, as a state department, the SNC operates within the context of statewide policy priorities and funding availability.

The State of the Sierra-Cascade

The Sierra-Cascade Region includes some of the most significant and iconic landscapes in the world. A land of superlatives, Sierra-Cascade landscapes include the volcanic plains of the Modoc plateau, the soaring granite domes of Yosemite Valley, and the towering peaks of Mt. Whitney and Mt. Shasta. Correspondingly, this Region is a global destination, drawing tens of millions of visitors each year.

Beyond their striking diversity and beauty, these natural landscapes are interdependent with the people who live and work there. Sierra-Cascade communities and counties depend on the Region's healthy and resilient ecosystems to provide clean water, unpolluted air, healthy vegetation and soils, as well as the revenue associated with forest products, agriculture and ranching, and recreation on public and private lands. At the same time, supporting the health and resilience of the ecosystems depends upon resource experts, land managers, Indigenous communities, and other caretakers to steward forests, waters, meadows, grasslands, and sagebrush steppe.

The Sierra-Cascade Region is also vital to California's well-being. Home to 75 percent of the state's water supply, Sierra-Cascade headwaters feed some of the largest cities and most productive agricultural lands in the world. Sierra-Cascade forests hold 50 percent of the state's forest carbon, and its grasslands and wetlands only add to that crucial carbon store. The Region's rivers are responsible for the majority of California's hydroelectric power, underscoring how essential the natural and working lands are to the realization of California's climate goals. Moreover, the Region is home to 60% of the state's animal biodiversity.

These values, however, are at risk. The Region continues to reckon with a legacy of fire suppression, removal of native peoples and their stewardship from their homelands, and intensive mining, logging, and grazing—all of which have increased the vulnerability of our natural and working lands to drought, pathogens, fire, floods, and other stressors. The combination of uncharacteristically severe wildfire, ecological degradation, and climate change pose an existential threat not only to the Region's forests and carbon stores, but also to the timing, quantity, and quality of water that

flows to the state from the Region’s snowpack—arguably California’s biggest and most important natural reservoir. Historical land-use decisions fragmented both land ownership and habitat, which has complicated land management, challenged species’ ability to adapt to climate change, and limited access to public land. And when Sierra-Cascade forests burn with uncharacteristic severity, dangerous air pollution impacts both the Region’s residents and major communities throughout the Central Valley, Sacramento, the Bay Area, and neighboring states.

The threats facing the Region have accelerated at a scale, severity, and pace unimaginable even five years ago. The SNC’s 2019–2024 Strategic Plan stated, “the Region’s watersheds and communities are facing unprecedented risks,” noting an increase in the number of acres burned in wildfires, the severity at which those burns occurred, and unprecedented drought and associated tree mortality. That observation proved to be both accurate for the time and prescient for what was to come. Shortly after the last Strategic Plan was released, the Region entered one of the most transformative years in recent history. An August 2020 lightning storm began the most severe California fire year on record, ultimately resulting in over four million acres burned across the state, with more than half burning at high severity. That was followed by another record-setting fire year in 2021: over 1.5 million acres burned in the Region and the Dixie Fire became the largest single (non-complex) fire in state history, burning 983,309 acres across five counties, which included a single, 290,000-acre high-severity patch.

Nearly half of the 2020 Creek Fire burned at high severity.



These fires occurred during, and were likely driven in part by, another extended, extreme drought. From 2020 to 2022, California experienced the driest three-year period on record, leaving reservoirs depleted and the Sierra-Cascade almost devoid of snowpack. Although the dramatic tree mortality event of 2012–16 has not been replicated, background rates of mortality continue to rise; aerial detection surveys show generally elevated non-wildfire mortality, with moderate to very severe mortality in the central and northern parts of the Region. Elevated tree mortality is concerning both in and of itself, but also as a catalyst of high-severity fire; researchers found that high levels of tree mortality in the southern Sierra Nevada strongly correlated with high-severity fire in the 2020 Creek Fire¹.

The dry start to the 2020s was followed by one of the wettest winters on record. The 2022–23 winter dropped as much as 700 inches of snow, setting records in central and southern Sierra Nevada, causing prolonged power outages and road closures, and catalyzing a new term: “hydroclimate whiplash.” Although it is not possible to tie any single weather event to climate change, models show that climate change is exacerbating California’s already highly variable climate, making both dry and wet periods more extreme. Warmer temperatures increase the likelihood of rainfall-driven floods and tinder-dry summer conditions that set the stage for extreme wildfires.

Naturally, these events carry consequences for the people who live and work here, reflecting the interdependencies of the natural and human communities of the Region. Despite covering one quarter of the state’s land mass, the Region is home to around 880,000 people, just over two percent of California’s population. Most residents rely on healthy forests and watersheds for their security, livelihoods, and recreation. The Region is also home to 43 federally recognized and 30 un-recognized tribes, whose people additionally look to the land for vital cultural and spiritual connections.

Although socioeconomic data specific to Sierra-Cascade communities is limited, many residents struggle with issues shared by other rural Californians, including housing costs disproportionate to local incomes, limited access to healthcare services, rural school and hospital closures, and limited broadband internet. Vulnerable residents—including people with disabilities or chronic illness, unhoused people, Indigenous people and people of color, people with limited English proficiency, households without a car, housing- and energy-burdened households, people living in poverty, and the elderly and children—face disproportionate impacts from these circumstances. Many communities suffer from interacting stressors exacerbated by climate change like extreme heat, excessive wildfire smoke, record-setting snowfall, and destructive landslides. These are just some examples of climate-related phenomena that regularly threaten communities in the Region.

1 Stephens, S.L., Bernal, A.A., Collins, B.M., Finney, M.A., Lautenberger, C., & Saah, D. (2022). Mass fire behavior created by extensive tree mortality and high density not predicted by operational fire behavior models in the southern Sierra Nevada. *Forest Ecology and Management*, 518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2022.120258>

The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded climatological, ecological, and socioeconomic stressors. Early in the pandemic, lockdowns brought recreation-driven economies to a standstill. Then, as urbanites sought outdoor space and clean air as a respite from pandemic confinement, demand for recreation surged, raising questions about how to manage use while mitigating negative impacts. In both 2020 and 2021, visitation was interrupted, and businesses suffered their own form of whiplash during public safety power shutoffs, suffocating wildfire smoke, and the unprecedented closure of national forests across the Region (and state) due to extreme wildfire conditions. Meanwhile, some communities have struggled to navigate an influx of higher-earning remote workers who have contributed to a national trend of spiking housing costs.



Touring the Fire Adapted 50 Project after the 2021 Caldor Fire near Sly Park, El Dorado County.

Finally, it is important to note that the events of the last five years are not uniformly negative. Policy makers and funders met new challenges with unprecedented investments in natural and working lands protection, public lands access, wildfire- and forest-resilience stewardship, and the human capacity to implement these goals. There are also silver linings in recent extreme fire and weather events: despite worrisome amounts of high-severity fire, the majority of acres burned have been low-to-moderate severity, effectively acting as a “first entry” treatment for fuel-laden forests. Scientists, managers, tribes, and other stakeholders are coordinating to leverage the benefits from that “good fire” to move our forests toward desired conditions. Partners and scientists

USFS prescribed fire near Camptonville, Yuba County.



are working together to plant “forests of the future” in areas that suffered from severe fire and/or high tree mortality and are using new climate-focused strategies to design those reforestation efforts. The 2022–23 winter pulled the state out of extreme drought for the first time in three years, and land managers seized the opportunity to increase the amount of prescribed fire. Finally, the SNC is part of an unprecedented level of coordination between local, state, and federal agencies, tribal entities, private landowners and organizations, and non-governmental organizations, all working towards a better future for the Region.

State Policies

The State of California has numerous policies that state departments and agencies are tasked to comply with, advance, and implement. As a state conservancy, the SNC aligns its work with a number of these statewide policies, including certain action plans, strategies, laws, and executive orders that pertain to particular subject matter areas and/or departmental procedures. Many of these state policies are also complemented by federal policies that have significant overlap with SNC's service area, approximately 60% of which is under federal management. This Plan is informed by and designed to implement the following state policies in the Region.

Wildfire and Forest Resilience

Developed to comprehensively address the state's wildfire crisis and reduce risk and catastrophic impacts for both landscapes and communities, [California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan](#) identifies the SNC as a Regional leader for implementing the plan. Many of the strategies identified in the Action Plan and the associated subject-matter strategies directly correspond to the SNC's own work to improve forest health and build wildfire resilience.

Through a close and enduring partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the SNC contributes to the execution of the [Agreement for Shared Stewardship of California's Forest and Rangelands Between California and the Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region](#) through its work to improve forest health and ecological and community wildfire resilience in the Region.

Climate Mitigation and Adaptation

The [Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy](#) expands California's climate and biodiversity action into the land-management sector, recognizing the benefits that natural and working lands offer to both climate mitigation and adaptation. Healthy forests and meadows are critical to preserving California's stored carbon, stabilizing stored carbon, preventing positive feedback loops of greenhouse gas emissions through uncharacteristically severe wildfire and deforestation, and protecting other environmental, economic, and sociocultural values. The forest-management actions identified in the strategy are closely aligned with this Plan's Healthy Forests and Watersheds goal.

Linking together the state's climate adaptation plans and actions, the [California Climate Adaptation Strategy](#) recognizes nature-based climate solutions and the resilience of natural systems as a priority for climate resilience. The SNC is identified as an implementing department for multiple related goals and success metrics, many of which will be advanced through this Plan.

As climate change supercharges extreme heat events, more Californians are seeking refuge from the heat in the lakes, forests, and mountains of the Region. The [Extreme Heat Action Plan](#) recognizes the need to ensure that outdoor access points and recreation infrastructure in extreme heat refugia can remain safe, available, accessible, and sustainable in the face of higher demand. The plan also calls for forest-health and mountain-meadow restoration projects that retain mountain snowpack and support water storage. The SNC is identified as an implementing department for these actions.



The Tule River in Springville, Tulare County.

Land Conservation

California's 30x30 goal seeks to conserve 30 percent of its lands and coastal waters by 2030. Since its founding, the SNC has funded many projects that officially contribute to the 30x30 target and the strategies identified in the [Pathways to 30x30](#) strategy. Continuing that contribution is a key goal of this Plan.

Tribal Co-management and Access

Governor Newsom's September 2020 [Statement of Administration Policy Regarding Native American Ancestral Lands](#) directs state agencies and departments to "support California tribes' co-management of and access to natural lands" within their ancestral territory and to "work cooperatively with California tribes that are interested in acquiring natural lands." This directive will be advanced through the multiple goals of this Plan.

Outdoor Access

The [Outdoors for All: Providing Equitable Access to Parks and Nature](#) strategy outlines pathways that governments, community organizations, philanthropy, private sector, and residents across California can take together to continue increasing access to the outdoors and nature. Advancing equitable outdoor access is central to this Plan.

Water Resources

The [California Water Resilience Portfolio](#) lays out actions to make the state better able to respond to drought, climate change, ecological needs, shifting water supplies, impacts to infrastructure, and more. Watersheds in the Sierra Nevada and Southern Cascades are the source of more than two-thirds of California’s developed water supply. The SNC’s work to improve the health of upper watersheds contributes to the actions laid out in the Portfolio.

Equity

To improve equity and ameliorate disparities, [Executive Order N-16-22](#) requires all state agencies and departments to embed equity in all strategic plans and to engage historically disadvantaged and underserved communities in planning processes, which this Plan strives to do.

Funding Context

The SNC has seen significant investment from the state of California with impressive collective impact in the Region. Especially in the forest-health and wildfire-resilience space, multiple years of significant funding for capacity building, planning, and implementation have enabled Regional partners to build and maintain momentum, simultaneously advancing hundreds of projects through various stages of development. Sustaining this momentum is essential to continue improving the health of Sierra-Cascade forests and increase the resilience and strength of our communities and landscapes to wildfire, while innovating and establishing new community-scaled restoration economies.

Specifically, between 2019 and 2024, the SNC was appropriated \$178,148,000 for Local Assistance funding and distributed \$143,041,904 for projects consistent with the SNC’s statute and primary initiative, the [Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program \(WIP\)](#). The SNC anticipates awarding the full \$178,148,000 before July 1, 2024. The SNC has also received just over \$24 million from the Department of Conservation to implement the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program in the Region, as well as additional funding through relationships with CAL FIRE and the

U.S. Forest Service. Because of their relative flexibility, these reimbursement grants (so-called because the SNC is reimbursed from the original funder) have been vital supplements to the SNC’s direct appropriations.

Early support and investment from the SNC has enabled numerous Regional partners to leverage significant funding from other, non-state sources, including through the [U.S. Forest Service’s Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#). Sustaining this momentum, including the ability to leverage major federal investment, is essential to continuing to improve the health of Sierra-Cascade forests and increase the resilience of our communities and landscapes to disturbances, such as wildfire.

The SNC has and will continue to maintain additional non-granting strategies to support and advance its goals, including helping partners pursue state and federal grants, exploring and diversifying the Region’s funding opportunities, providing technical assistance to partners, supporting community convening, and engaging in strategic communications and policy development. (These strategies are described in more detail in [“Advancing Regional Goals.”](#))

While the SNC, as with all California state entities, cannot know future budget surpluses and shortfalls or the outcome of future bond proposals, it is known that the region has a great need for state investments to achieve SNC’s mission. The SNC’s strong track record of implementing effective projects reflects the value of investing in its work.

Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program

This Plan recognizes the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) as the SNC’s keystone initiative. The WIP is an integrated and dynamic approach to restoring resilience in ecological and human communities of the Region. It has been recognized as a model program for focusing resources and activities on the most difficult problems, lifting communities by meeting them where they are, and breaking down capacity, funding, and bureaucratic barriers. In light of the existential threat that degraded forests and watersheds pose to ecological and human communities across the Region (and state), forest and watershed health serve as the foundation of the WIP. By using the WIP as an “umbrella” program that weaves together the four Regional goals described below, the SNC offers a program of work that is consistent with its broad mission and that acknowledges the interrelationships and dependencies inherent to the Region.

REGIONAL GOALS

The Regional goals reflect the primary issue areas that the SNC will engage in. At the intersection of the SNC’s statutory mandate and mission, Regional partners’ needs, funding opportunities, and organizational expertise, the SNC’s programmatic work will focus on advancing these goals and their associated actions and outcomes:

- Healthy Forests and Watersheds
- Resilient Sierra-Cascade Communities
- Sustainable Recreation, Tourism, and Equitable Outdoor Access
- Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands



Looking toward Topaz Lake, Mono County.



Sierraville, Sierra County.

The SNC cannot achieve any of its goals alone. These issue areas are complex and dynamic, and progress is most likely when communities, land managers, partner organizations, tribes, funders, and local, state, and federal leaders communicate and work collaboratively. Achieving these goals may depend on external factors, such as the capacity of the SNC’s partners and state and federal funding landscapes.

As has been done in the past, the SNC anticipates adapting to bumps in the road as they arise and will use progress measurements to assess headway and guide adjustments in its strategies and approaches. No matter the challenges, the SNC will continue its work to catalyze and contribute to building resilience across the Region.



TPI Bootsle Project, Plumas National Forest.



Case Mountain Giant Sequoias, Sequoia National Forest.

Healthy Forests and Watersheds

Healthy forests and watersheds are the foundation of a healthy Sierra-Cascade Region, which, in turn, is critical to a healthy California. Characteristics of a healthy watershed include natural disturbance processes, such as high spring flows and beneficial fire, and a diversity of plant and animal species and habitat types. Together, these elements help maintain a functioning biological community and greater ecological integrity, enhancing the overall vitality of the system. Essential to all of this is a balanced interaction with people who live in, enjoy, and steward these landscapes.

As key ecosystem types in the upper headwaters of the Sierra-Cascade Region, forests and meadows function together to moderate the severity of wildfire, protect water quality and attenuate runoff, and store and sequester carbon. When a forest with heterogeneous structure, composition, and age classes experiences wildfire, that wildfire is more likely to have a beneficial ecological impact, which in turn helps protect water quality from sediment and debris. Meadows with intact hydrology act as natural fuel breaks for forest fires, while also mitigating the impacts of a warming climate by holding water when more precipitation falls as rain. When restored and healthy, both forests and meadows act as sinks for greenhouse gases, storing impressive amounts of carbon. Overall, healthy watersheds are both more resilient to the impacts of a warming climate and more likely to help mitigate climate change as stable carbon stores.

Unfortunately, the combined impacts of recent mega-disturbances, legacy land-management practices—including the removal of native people—and climate change are threatening the integrity of these ecological systems. Due to the combination of wildfire, drought, and drought-associated beetle epidemics, 30 percent of the Region's forests have transitioned to non-forest vegetation. Similarly, roughly 50 percent of existing meadows are degraded or expected to be degraded and many more have already disappeared.

Vulnerable and degraded ecosystems also have real-life consequences for the Region’s human communities. In the last five years, residents have dealt with dwindling water supplies, wildfires that have destroyed communities and resulted in prolonged evacuations, and record-setting snowfall and damaging winter storms—all of which tested the limits of individual and community resilience. These stressors are compounded by the complexity of well-intended environmental regulations that can make both the work of recovery and proactive planning and prevention at scale challenging—especially for small, rural organizations and community groups.



Lower Ackerson Meadow, Yosemite National Park. *Photography: Melissa Steller.*

Nevertheless, embedded in these challenges are opportunity, political interest, and attention. California met challenges head-on with unprecedented funding, almost \$140 million of which the SNC was able to implement through its forest and watershed health grant programs. The SNC also launched its [Landscape Investment Strategy](#), piloting ways to efficiently fund and administer programs of work across a landscape, realize economies of scale for project implementation, and achieve landscape-scale resilience in support of a mosaic of ecosystems and associated co-benefits. Finally, the SNC’s implementation of the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP) helped build Regional capacity to prioritize, develop, and implement forest-health and wildfire-resilience projects. All these efforts put into practice our scientific and common understanding of how to reduce fuels, thin overcrowded forests, reintroduce beneficial fire, restore aquatic systems and meadows, renew tribal stewardship when desired by tribes, and invest in community-scaled biomass infrastructure to process restoration byproducts without significant emissions of greenhouse gases or pollutants—all of which build resilience for our ecosystems and communities.

To support this goal, the SNC has established the following objectives.

Build Capacity

Build the capacity of partners to plan, prioritize, and implement projects.

- Help grant-eligible organizations, partnerships, and tribes develop the capacity to effectively acquire and administer funding to improve the health and resilience of Regional forests and watersheds.
- Work with partners to identify and apply for funding to implement activities that support this goal.
- Support Regional tribes to develop capacity to advance tribal priority projects, build tribal workforce, protect and manage tribal lands, and contribute tribal expertise to forest health, meadow restoration, and watershed projects.

Progress Measurements:

- Funds secured by Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program partners for forest and watershed health projects.
- Number of projects funded by the SNC that are led by tribes or that include tribal co-management.

Support Landscape-scale Action

Support partners' readiness for and implementation of large-landscape programs of work in forests and upper watersheds.

- Develop partners' ability to acquire and administer significant, long-term investment and implement projects at the landscape scale and across a mosaic of ecosystems and land ownerships.
- Support partners to develop an assessment of landscape conditions and risks to communities and other assets.
- Support partners to develop and prioritize a multi-year portfolio of strategic actions and projects to address vulnerabilities and needs.
- Encourage partners to integrate sustainable forest and watershed restoration with other project types, where feasible.
- Organize and advocate for significant, multi-agency, state, and federal funding to be directed to collaborative land-management partnerships to develop, plan, and implement portfolios of projects.
- Advocate for and secure increased funding for forest and watershed health activities, including funding for the SNC and other agencies and organizations.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of landscape-scale partnerships that have advanced along the readiness pipeline with SNC's assistance.
- Number of landscape-scale investments in the Region that SNC contributes funding and/or capacity to.

Provide Funding

Administer grant programs and other funding opportunities through which eligible partners may access SNC funding to plan and implement projects that advance forest and watershed health, wildfire resilience, and related high-impact, multi-benefit outcomes.

Progress Measurements:

- Acres restored or managed with SNC funding.
- Acres planned and prioritized for restoration or management with SNC funding.

Support Biomass Utilization

Support the planning and development of community-scale infrastructure and other options to process and utilize biomass generated by forest health and restoration projects.

- Fund and/or partner with other entities to develop community-scale biomass utilization and wood-products facilities throughout the Region.
- Support community-scale biomass utilization and wood processing as a tool to enhance local economies.
- Support the long-term stability of forest carbon and process residual material from thinning and fuels-reduction projects in ways that minimize emission of greenhouse gases and pollutants.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of biomass utilization and wood products facility projects funded by SNC.
- Number of biomass utilization and wood products facility projects receiving technical assistance from SNC.



Mariposa, the western gateway to Yosemite National Park, Mariposa County.



Indian Valley Wood Utilization Campus in Crescent Mills, Plumas County.

Resilient Sierra-Cascade Communities

Many communities in the Region were built by economic engines fueled with natural resources—namely precious metals in the ground and timber growing from it. As these Regional natural resource industries faded, once thriving towns shrank; first after the gold rush and again in the 1980s when global economic forces and a changing regulatory environment took their tolls on the timber industry.

Some communities adapted by welcoming increasing numbers of retirees and Californians willing to trade long commutes to cities for a rural lifestyle and more affordable housing. More remote parts of the Region, and those located next to well-known recreational and scenic amenities, turned to tourism. Results have been mixed, but neither strategy has led to widespread and stable economic opportunities that support livelihoods for residents.

Today, Regional communities also face a new set of varied challenges. Towns that turned to tourism are dealing with housing-affordability crises as local housing costs outpace earning power, and some struggle to support full-time residents with seasonal industries. Access to basic services, like health care, is difficult in many smaller communities, including those with relatively older populations. Rural hospitals are struggling, broadband internet is still unreliable or unavailable for some, and rural communities share many of the same challenges associated with mental-health issues and addiction experienced by more urban areas across the state. And in this context of relative economic insecurity, Regional communities have recently confronted an unprecedented string of environmental disasters and continue to face high risk from wildfire.

To support this goal, the SNC has established the following objectives.

Expand Knowledge

Deepen relationships and expertise regarding the social and economic challenges facing the Region, both current and future.

- Perform or commission a socioeconomic analysis of the Region to better understand, reflect, and respond to community resilience opportunities through outreach and funding activities.
- Elevate Regional economic and social opportunities and challenges in SNC's outreach and education activities to encourage funding and policy solutions that benefit Regional communities.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of datasets identified that lead toward a regional socioeconomic analysis.
- Identified actions through which SNC could better contribute to community resilience through outreach, capacity assistance, and funding.

Provide Funding

Administer grant programs and other funding opportunities through which eligible partners may access SNC funding to plan and implement projects that advance community resilience in the Sierra-Cascade Region.

- Provide local assistance funding, as available, for projects that support resilient Sierra-Cascade communities and the Region's social and economic health, in a manner keeping with the SNC's statutory obligations and natural resource focus.
- Support capacity building, project development, efforts to secure funding, and large-scale project readiness to help communities build resilience to wildfire and other climate-related impacts.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of projects funded by the SNC that support community resilience.
- Number of partnerships advancing community resilience that the SNC supports through funding or technical assistance.



Trail construction on Mt. Hough. *Photography: Ken Etzel, Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship.*



The wheelchair-accessible Hazel Meadows boardwalk at Jenkinson Lake, El Dorado County.

Sustainable Recreation and Tourism and Equitable Outdoor Access

The magnificent and diverse outdoor recreation opportunities of the Sierra-Cascade are some of the Region’s primary defining features. Many visitors come to know and love the Region through one of its infinite outdoor recreation opportunities, particularly on public land, including national forests, national parks, and state parks. For many residents, outdoor recreation is a way of life; for many communities, it is a primary economic driver.

In the Region and across the country, outdoor recreation has been growing in popularity—and economic value—for many years. This was reflected in the 2018 passage of Prop 68, through which the SNC received funding to support outdoor recreation in the Region. Today, some parts of the Region are in the early stages of developing recreation opportunities, while others already have a thriving recreation-based economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the demand for outdoor experiences to new heights. As more and more people sought ways to enjoy life outside, the Region experienced a dramatic surge in visitors. This period also led to a more widespread understanding of the importance of outdoor access for physical and mental health, while also illuminating the inequitable access to outdoor spaces and activities.

Recent years have also exposed the vulnerability of the Region’s recreation infrastructure and recreation-based economies. In some places, the pandemic’s surge in demand overwhelmed recreation sites and local towns to the detriment of visitor experience, environmental quality, public land managers’ capacity, and residents’ quality of life. At the same time, in 2020 and 2021, the National Forest System in California—nearly two-thirds of all the land in the Region and a major draw for recreators—shut down

due to record-breaking wildfires. As forest closures and dense smoke kept visitors home for weeks at a time, the economic pendulum swung dramatically for local residents and businesses dependent on tourism and outdoor recreation.

Serving the Region’s diverse recreation and outdoor access needs requires an approach that can support critical recreational needs, balance disparate interests, and create opportunities for everyone to access the outdoors. Accordingly, actions under this goal are intended to support recreation planning and infrastructure, including on public lands; help communities anticipate, avoid, and mitigate challenges associated with high recreation use and recreation-based economies; and improve outdoor access for communities that have not traditionally had equitable access to nature.

To support these goals, the SNC has established the following objectives.

Build Capacity

Build the capacity of partners to plan, prioritize, and implement projects.

- Help grant-eligible organizations, partnerships and tribes develop the capacity to effectively acquire and administer funding to plan and develop recreation infrastructure; anticipate, avoid, and mitigate impacts from high recreation use; and create outdoor opportunities for diverse communities.
- Work with partners to identify and apply for funding to implement projects that support this goal.
- Identify and support new partners, such as trail-building organizations, parks and recreation departments, and economic development boards, to plan and develop projects.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of projects receiving technical assistance from the SNC that advance recreation, tourism, and access project development and planning.

Provide Funding

Administer grant programs and other funding opportunities through which eligible partners may access SNC funding to plan and implement projects that advance sustainable recreation, equitable outdoor access, and related high-impact, multi-benefit outcomes.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of trail miles and infrastructure facilities planned, built, and/or maintained with SNC funding.
- Number of projects funded by the SNC that support recreation, tourism, and access planning and project development.

Build Climate Resilience

Support the planning, development, and maintenance of recreation and outdoor infrastructure that anticipates or adapts to increased use and pressure from climate change and visitors escaping extreme heat.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of projects incorporating climate-resilient outdoor recreation and access that the SNC supports through funding or technical assistance.

Increase Access

Support increased access to nature for communities that have not traditionally had equitable access.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of projects funded by the SNC that advance equitable access for historically excluded communities.
- Number of projects receiving technical assistance from SNC that advance equitable access for historically excluded communities.

Support Landscape-scale Action

Support landscape-based partnerships to develop an assessment of landscape conditions and risks to recreational infrastructure and other assets.

- Support partners to develop a multi-year portfolio of strategic actions and projects to address vulnerabilities and needs.
- Advocate for and secure increased funding for sustainable recreation and equitable outdoor access, including funding for the SNC and other agencies and organizations.
- Encourage partners to integrate sustainable recreation with other project types, where feasible.
- Provide staff and/or technical support to partners to develop and implement strategies to improve recreational experience, mitigate impacts from recreation, and improve equitable access.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of projects funded by the SNC that integrate sustainable recreation, tourism, and equitable outdoor access projects or outcomes into a broader program of work.
- Number of projects receiving technical assistance from the SNC that integrate sustainable recreation, tourism, and equitable outdoor access projects or outcomes into a broader program of work.



Kolo Kam'ap (Fay Creek Ranch), Kern County.
Photography: Western Rivers Conservancy.



Prescribed fire on the Independence Lake Preserve, Nevada County.

Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands

The SNC's Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands Goal recognizes the values that natural and working lands contribute to human and ecological communities across the Region. From critical habitat and migration corridors to places of cultural, spiritual, and social connection, to agricultural and working landscapes that produce useful materials and goods, the Region's lands and waters are a cornerstone of its identity.

A core component of the SNC's mission, the Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands Goal was reinvigorated over the previous planning period with funding from Proposition 68 and the budget allocations for nature-based climate solutions. Looking forward, voluntary conservation will continue to be an essential tool to achieve California's landmark 30x30 goal, which seeks to protect 30 percent of the state's lands and coastal waters by 2030. Initiated through Executive Order N-82-20 in 2020 and codified in statute in 2023, this target recognizes both the accelerating biodiversity crisis and the role of conservation in building climate resilience.

Through its Conservation and Stewardship of Natural & Working Lands Goal, the SNC seeks to build the resilience of our natural communities and help protect the connection between land and people. This may include activities that preserve key habitat or connect migration corridors for climate-vulnerable species, conserve the significant carbon stores held within our agricultural and working lands, or protect lands that have cultural, economic, or recreational value. The ongoing stewardship of protected lands is equally necessary to maintain or improve ecological processes and functions, retain unique or vulnerable characteristics of specific landscapes, and enhance the resilience to climate change and other stressors. Finally, conservation and stewardship of our natural and working lands are essential to sustaining the vital cultural and spiritual relationship between land and people.

To support this goal, the SNC has established the following objectives.

Build Capacity

Build the capacity of partners to plan, prioritize, and implement projects.

- Help grant-eligible organizations, partnerships, and tribes develop the capacity to effectively acquire and administer funding to plan and implement land conservation and stewardship projects.
- Work with partners to identify and apply for funding to implement projects that support this goal.

Progress Measurement:

- Number of projects receiving technical assistance from the SNC that advance land conservation and stewardship project development and planning.

Provide Funding

Administer grant programs and other funding opportunities through which eligible partners may access SNC funding to plan and implement projects that advance the conservation and stewardship of natural and working lands, and related high-impact, multi-benefit outcomes.

Progress Measurement:

- Acres of land conserved and/or conserved land stewarded with SNC funding.

Advance Equity and Inclusion

Support conservation and stewardship by partners that have not yet been meaningfully included in or benefitted from traditional land-conservation actions.

- Prioritize partnering with tribes, incorporating Indigenous leadership of projects, and integration of Indigenous knowledge, culture, and science into all projects.
- Support return of ancestral lands to tribes and tribal entities, in recognition of their role as original stewards of the Sierra-Cascade Region.
- Support partners representing and delivering benefits to diverse communities that have been historically underrepresented in Sierra-Cascade conservation and stewardship.

Progress Measurements:

- Number of land conservation and stewardship projects funded by the SNC that are led by tribes and historically underrepresented groups.
- Number of acres returned through SNC grants to tribes and tribal entities.

Support Landscape-scale Action

Support and, if possible, fund integrated programs of work that include conservation and stewardship of natural and working lands.

- Support landscape-based partnerships to develop an assessment of landscape conditions and risks to unique and/or vulnerable landscapes, including across multiple ecosystem and ownership boundaries.
- Support partners to develop a multi-year portfolio of strategic actions and projects to address vulnerabilities and needs.
- Encourage partners to integrate conservation with other project types, where feasible.
- Advocate for and secure increased funding for conservation and stewardship, including funding for the SNC and other agencies and organizations.
- Provide staff and/or technical support to partners to develop and implement strategies to conserve and steward lands.

Progress Measurement:

- Number of projects funded by the SNC that integrate land conservation and stewardship projects or outcomes.

Cinnamon Ranch in the Owens Valley, Inyo County. *Photography: Eastern Sierra Land Trust.*



ADVANCING REGIONAL GOALS

The SNC advances its Regional goals through a multi-pronged approach. At the center of this approach is the strategy that SNC uses to design, structure, and coordinate its work. This strategy is the driving force behind the SNC's efforts in service of the Regional goals. In addition to this strategy, efforts to strengthen the organization will ensure organizational stability, and a process for planning and tracking progress will hold the SNC accountable to this Plan and enable adaptation, where necessary.

Strategy for Building Regional Resilience

Given the multi-faceted and complex nature of the Regional goals, the SNC anticipates employing various approaches in pursuit of each goal. This flexibility enables the SNC to tackle a problem from multiple sides and to respond to key needs and opportunities in an integrated manner, while also operating efficiently and accommodating resource limitations.

The following strategy to build Regional resilience supports all goals:

- Develop Regional expertise grounded in strong relationships and direct community engagement, including:
 - Employ and position staff throughout the Region.
 - Build strong and lasting relationships with partners, including grantees, land managers, nonprofit organizations, tribes and tribal entities, collaboratives, community leaders, etc.
 - Maintain a strong Regional presence by showing up, listening, and, when able, responding to needs.
- Innovate to meet critical needs and opportunities.
 - Identify and respond to emerging needs and opportunities.
 - Support and develop new partnerships and initiatives and engage diverse stakeholders that can help advance the SNC mission.
 - Think and act outside the box to develop, pilot, and establish creative solutions.
- Build capacity and catalyze partnerships within the Region.
 - Support capacity-building programs through staff time and grant awards.
 - Provide direct technical assistance to partners.
 - Convene, facilitate, and participate in collaboration among diverse community partners, land managers, government entities, tribes, funders, and scientists.



Looking toward Mt. Shasta from Cedar Pass, Modoc County.

- Invest at every stage in the life of a project and across all scales.
 - Invest in capacity-building programs that support organizational development, convening, project development, and project planning to increase efficacy and likelihood of funding and to support the engagement of broad stakeholders.
 - Support high-priority planning and implementation projects that protect and sustain key values in the Region.
 - Fund landscape-scale programs of work that create efficiencies for partners and respond to needs at the appropriate scale.
- Leverage multiple funding streams to accelerate partners' work in the Region.
 - Allocate and disburse appropriations received in the state budget process and from bonds.
 - Apply for and manage grants from other state and federal agencies.
 - Build funding partnerships with other agencies to invest at scale.
 - Pursue funding from novel sources.
 - Build regional, state, and federal understanding and support for effective funding partnerships.
- Communicate about the Region to inform and inspire SNC partners and state decision-makers.
 - Tell stories about the Region, its value and needs, and the critical work of our partners in ways that are accessible to a diverse audience.
 - Build relationships with key decision-makers to help ensure that the Region's perspectives and values are understood and considered.
 - Inform Regional and statewide policy conversations, assessments, and decisions.
 - Develop understanding of and support for the SNC's unique approach and impact among key stakeholders.

The SNC's multi-prolonged strategy reflects one of its great strengths: the ability to be nimble. As the opportunity for the SNC to invest directly in Regional projects is often at the whims of the state budget and funding decisions, this approach ensures that the SNC can continue to support the Region even when funding for grant programs is not available. By developing and maintaining the internal capacity to build understanding, identify needs, develop partnerships, create and catalyze opportunities, identify and leverage non-traditional funding opportunities, and propose and communicate new approaches and policies, the SNC ensures that it can continue to problem solve, support partners, and advance Regional goals throughout fiscal ups and downs.

At the foundation of this multi-pronged strategy are two of the SNC's most valuable and unique attributes: its deep Regional expertise, developed through close relationships with partners and direct engagement in communities, and its ability to innovate by working in partnership with others. These attributes underpin all the SNC's work in the Region.

Organizational Goals

For the SNC to be successful in implementing Regional goals and advancing its mission, it must also set organizational goals that support SNC staff, sustain and improve operations, and set a solid foundation for delivering quality work into the Region. Over the past five years, the SNC experienced a period of significant growth, both in terms of staff size and the amount of local assistance funding and technical assistance delivered to the Region. This growth not only developed the SNC's own understanding of the impact it can have in the Region, but also helped identify additional opportunities to maintain momentum, more fully live organizational values, make business practices more efficient, and support SNC employees and sustain its people-first culture. To keep SNC on track and on solid footing in the years ahead, we will work to support the following organizational goals over the next five years:

- Secure consistent, reliable, and diverse funding to ensure long-term organizational health and the ongoing ability to provide needed resources across the Region.
 - Respond to high demand for funding across the Region by continuing to fund eligible projects with SNC funding when possible and supporting partners in the pursuit of other funds when not.
 - Demonstrate the importance of sustained, multi-year funding in the Region, and showcase SNC's ability to efficiently and effectively distribute state funding to meet policy objectives.
 - Manage resources with transparency and accountability to maintain stability, support staff, and fully deliver on the mission.
 - Maintain internal readiness and staffing levels to support existing programs and functions and establish additional areas of work, as funding allows.

- Embed equity.
 - Continue to identify and act on opportunities to embed equity throughout all components of the SNC’s work.
 - Support and foster a welcoming and inclusive environment, within the SNC organization and Board, so as to benefit from a diversity of backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives.
 - Perform or commission an analysis of the SNC’s programs to date to understand which communities/populations have and have not benefitted from SNC investments, and utilize the outcomes to assess how to have a more equitable impact.
- Distribute funding, support, and other resources with an emphasis on supporting communities that have historically been excluded.
- Grow staff knowledge and understanding of the demographics of the Region, and the socioeconomic challenges and opportunities that exist, to broaden SNC’s reach to all communities within the Region.
- Maintain strong internal operations.
 - Continuously strive to improve operational systems, including payroll, accounting processes, software management systems, and purchasing to ensure efficient use of resources and delivery of services.
 - Build upon SNC’s strong organizational foundation to operate as a leader amongst state conservancies.
- Support staff as the SNC’s greatest asset.
 - Support staff recruitment and retention by building and maintaining SNC’s culture as a great place to work.
 - Create professional growth opportunities and career pathways based on employee interests and core and leadership competencies—within the SNC and broader civil service—by offering training and resources and by building opportunities for advancement and/or enrichment within the organizational structure.
 - Support and strengthen a stable and prepared workforce by completing and implementing workforce assessments and plans to identify and address any workforce-related risks.
- Evaluate project tracking and reporting to better understand SNC’s impact.
 - Review current project-tracking efforts and requirements, and identify opportunities to streamline responsibilities and processes.
 - Identify information gaps that limit SNC’s understanding of its impact.
 - Evaluate and adopt opportunities to update processes and improve information accessibility.

Accountability

The SNC is committed to taking action that supports progress in establishing and achieving its Regional Goals and objectives, operating within the principles of transparency, efficiency, and accountability. The SNC has identified its goals, objectives, and progress measurements through a public process and will report publicly on planned actions and on progress, opportunities, and challenges met throughout the course of a fiscal year.

Planning

In this Plan, the SNC has established goals, objectives, and progress measurements. Implementation of this Plan will be guided by the creation of annual Action Plans that present a prioritized list of efforts and focus of resources to guide staff actions in the coming year. Action Plans will be developed by staff, presented publicly, and be approved by the Board each June.

The annual Action Plans will correspond with the overarching objectives of the five-year Plan and will identify specific actions in service of each goal that SNC will undertake in the upcoming year. Identifying actions on an annual basis provides flexibility, recognizing there are a number of factors that can affect the activities undertaken by the SNC year-to-year, such as the availability of funding, staffing changes, and state policy priorities.



Surveying impacts after the 2022 Dixie Fire.

Tracking and Reporting Progress

The SNC will implement Action Plans throughout its organizational structure, via periodic operational reviews, and through regular meetings across the SNC's various divisions. At the end of each fiscal year, staff reports to the Board on the implementation of the Action Plan, which tasks will be carried over and/or modified for the subsequent Action Plan, and the progress being made toward completion of the five-year Plan.

Progress measurements noted above are intended to help the SNC track progress toward its objectives and better characterize its impact in the Region. These will serve as an internal accountability mechanism, enable regular evaluation and adaptation, and help the SNC to communicate the outcomes of its work in a metrics-driven environment. However, the SNC understands that much of its work and impact, such as building capacity, participating in community collaboratives, and providing technical assistance, is far more qualitative than quantitative. For this reason, the SNC approaches these progress measurements as only one indicator of progress, rather than the sole assessment of whether it has achieved its goals.

The SNC will strive to achieve the goals and objectives identified in this Plan to advance Regional goals. We will continuously analyze needs, barriers, and opportunities. The SNC leadership team and staff will use the objectives and progress measurements to assess success and learn lessons to guide future action. Staff will work with the Board, partners, and interested public to build a resilient Sierra-Cascade Region in which communities, tribes, visitors, and ecosystems thrive into the future.

September 2023 Board Tour around Kernville, Tulare County.

