

Millions possible for Sierra protection

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Tulare County public and government organizations could vie for portions of \$5 million in state grant money to reduce fire risks and improve watersheds in the Sierra foothills.

The money is part of \$10 million in Proposition 84 bond funds that the state of California had put on hold but released in April, Elizabeth van Wagtendonk, a representative of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, told the Tulare County Board of Supervisors Tuesday.

The conservancy is a state-run organization that promotes the environmental and economic well-being of California's Sierra range, which covers all or part of 22 counties, including the Tulare County foothills.

It was allotted \$54 million raised through bonds sold after state voters passed Prop. 84, the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coast Protection Bond Act of 2006.

About \$30 million of the bond money was allocated for projects in the Sierra — including some by organizations in Tulare County — before the state stop doling out the grant money in December 2008 because of the budget crises.

"We've been able to free up some of these funds," van Wagtendonk said.

The \$10 million released in April is for groups with projects to improve watersheds on public lands in the Sierra.

That can include projects to reduce fire risks, as ash and erosion from scorched land and plants can foul up lakes and streams, said Pete Dufor, a spokesman for the agency.

Possible projects

Among the projects the grants could fund:

- Clearing areas of excess brush and trees, which would serve as fuel if a fire breaks out.
- Efforts to reduce soil erosion. These could be combined with other projects, such as creating hiking and bike trails on berms.
- Buying easements from foothill land owners so they don't develop portions of their land or engage in certain activities, such as herding cattle through streams.

Grant money also can be used to fund the planning of projects funded by other sources, Dufor said.

The conservancy divides the 25 million-acre Sierra range in California into six "conservancy regions," with portions of Tulare, Madera, Fresno and Kern comprising the south region.

Each region will have \$1 million in grant money available; the remaining \$4 million could be used in any of the Sierra regions.

Supervisor Steve Worthley said he knows of no plans to apply for projects on county land.

"We'll probably encourage people to apply," he said.
