

Background

The December 2012 Board tour and the presentation by Izzy Martin from The Sierra Fund during the Board meeting highlighted legacy impacts from California's Gold Rush. Toxic substance hazards, notably mercury, are of particular concern for downstream populations and communities. There are over 47,000 identified abandoned mines in the state of California. A large volume of these identified abandoned mines are located in the Sierra Nevada Region.

Following the field tour and presentation, the Board requested Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) staff, in consultation with The Sierra Fund, consider potential actions and an appropriate role SNC could undertake to address abandoned mine land issues in the Region.

To date, the SNC has been involved with abandoned mine land remediation efforts through participation in the Department of Conservation Abandoned Mine Lands Forum, The Sierra Fund Abandoned Mine Lands events, and through funding projects under the SNC Proposition 84 Grants Program. The SNC has funded three projects supporting efforts to mitigate the legacy impacts of mining:

- Environmental Review Assessing the Impacts of Removing Mercury Laden Sediment from Combie Reservoir - Nevada Irrigation District: Mercury laden sediment currently is trapped behind numerous dams within the Region. The Combie Reservoir Project is a pilot project that promotes an increase in storage capacity within a reservoir by alleviating further release of mercury through sedimentation disturbance during dredging.
- Humbug Creek Watershed Assessment and Management Plan - The Sierra Fund: Malakoff Diggins Mine (State Park), an abandoned hydraulic mine site with many mining features, has been identified as the source of mercury in Humbug Creek, a tributary to the South Yuba River. The goal of the Humbug Creek Project is to identify which feature is the source of the mercury and develop a remediation plan.
- Mercury Bioavailability and Transport in Deer Creek over Lake Wildwood Reservoir - Friends of Deer Creek: Dams do not block mercury from moving downstream. The Lake Wildwood Project measured contamination in algae, macro-invertebrates, and fish above and below the lake to determine the potential transport and dissemination of mercury moving over the dam.

Current Status

Since the December 2012 Board meeting, staff has met with Izzy Martin and Dr. Carrie Monohan from The Sierra Fund, to explore potential roles for the SNC and partners in support of abandoned mine remediation. Immediate actions were identified to address some of the initial concerns raised by The Sierra Fund associated with public funding for acquisition of properties with abandoned mines. As a result, the Natural Resources Agency (Agency) is planning to convene selected departments within the Agency to discuss the potential for consistent Agency-wide policies.

Other actions that were discussed include:

- Recommending to the Board that projects to address toxic substance issues associated with abandoned mine lands in the Sierra be included as eligible projects for use of remaining Proposition 84 funds (see Agenda Item XI);
- Working with The Sierra Fund, other State agencies, and other entities to explore opportunities to partner in addressing issues related to abandoned mines, including exploring avenues to provide technical assistance resources for local governments in possession of contaminated abandoned mine sites; and,
- Seeking long term funding for the SNC to address abandoned mine land issues by building upon the continuing efforts of The Sierra Fund to educate legislators and the public about the importance of remediation work to the reliability and sustainability of California's water supply.

Next Steps

Staff will continue to consider appropriate roles and activities for the SNC to address this important issue, in coordination with the work being done by The Sierra Fund. Specific actions will be identified in the 2013-14 Action Plan, which will be presented to the Board at the June 2013 meeting.

Recommendation

This is an informational item only; no formal action is needed by the Board at this time, although Board members are encouraged to share their thoughts and comments.