

Background

For more than six years, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has been actively involved in issues relating to forest and community health. The Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI) was adopted by the Board in 2011 and was endorsed by all 22 Sierra counties, as well as numerous other groups and organizations. It called for parties to work together in a collaborative manner with the objectives of restoring forests to ecological health and improving local communities' social and economic well-being. As a part of SNFCI's ongoing work, the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council (Coordinating Council) continues to represent a wide range of diverse perspectives unified by the common goals of increasing the pace and scale of restoration of the Sierra Nevada's forests and building healthier ecosystems, economies, and communities in the Sierra Nevada. Various forest collaboratives also continue their work to carry out this same mission on the ground in specific watersheds and communities.

In June 2014, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures the issues being addressed under SNFCI were the organization's top priority, which resulted in the [State of Sierra Nevada's Forests Report](#), which represents the current understanding of forest conditions and potential consequences. Recognizing that a more holistic approach to watershed health in the Sierra was needed, SNC staff worked closely with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Region 5 in the development and subsequent launch of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) on March 4, 2015. The WIP is a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes. The USFS is actively engaged in all aspects of the WIP, including general coordination, communications, funding development, policy, and project identification and implementation. In July 2015, SNC staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 met with Secretary John Laird and California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) staff, resulting in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that commits the CNRA and USFS Region 5 to a cooperative state/federal collaboration to support the WIP. The SNC is designated as the lead state agency for coordination and implementation of the WIP.

In late June 2015, staff worked with the USFS and CNRA to have a portion of the Sierra Nevada Region included in [the designation of the California Headwaters as a Resilient Lands and Waters Region \(CA Headwaters\)](#). While this designation doesn't result in new funding for the Region, it does shine a light on the importance of the Sierra to California, and supports the work SNC and its partners are striving to accomplish through the WIP. SNC is currently in close collaboration with USFS in the development of communications materials and establishment of a working group in support of the CA Headwaters initiative.

Boardmembers Bob Kirkwood and Pam Giacomini continue to serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the WIP effort.

Current Status

An initial draft of the WIP Regional Strategy was developed by SNC staff, and presented to the Board in December 2015. This Strategy describes in detail the process and timeline for the assessment of restoration needs that is currently underway. The watershed assessments will include information developed by the USFS, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and National Park Service (NPS) for lands they manage, as well as information gathered by the Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC), including other lands and broader watershed information. It also describes Regional efforts related to increased investment, addressing key policy issues, and development of additional restoration related infrastructure. Finally, the Strategy describes the process of project identification and implementation, the ultimate key objective of the WIP.

The initial draft has been revised based on feedback from the Board and USFS Region 5, and the final draft was circulated to existing and new partners for feedback, as well as posted for public comment in early February. One key addition to the draft reviewed by the Board is a specific reference to the establishment of at least two pilot watersheds where new approaches to deliver conservation activities can be explored. This will include the issues of governance, funding, and project implementation. In addition, the critical role that wood/biomass infrastructure plays in restoration has been highlighted in efforts to address the tree mortality epidemic, and this issue will likely become even a greater focus under WIP. The public comment period will close March 18, 2016, though the WIP Regional Strategy will be updated as needed to reflect necessary course changes on an ongoing basis.

Here are some of the other key activities under the WIP over the last three months:

Integrated Regional Conservation and Development Program (IRCAD)

On January 20, Executive Officer Jim Branham and Regional Forester Randy Moore presented the WIP and the CA Headwaters Partnership to the CA Biodiversity Council (the Biodiversity Council is comprised of agency leaders of state and federal agencies, and local government). The Council has entered into an agreement with the state's Strategic Growth Council in support of an effort to "coordinate state agencies for the development and implementation of an Integrated Regional Planning approach to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of regional development and natural resource conservation in California." Discussions continue as to the potential of the WIP being selected as a pilot project for this effort. Further details as to the purpose and function of the pilot are still being discussed, but this designation could significantly heighten the recognition of the WIP with state and federal agencies, and could result in additional support for the effort. Staff will continue to continue consultation with Boardmembers Kirkwood and Giacomini about this effort moving forward.

National Disaster Resilience Competition (NDRC)

The SNC staff worked with key partners to secure a \$70 million proposal for the Rim Fire area through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's NDRC (see [Agenda Item XII](#) for additional detail). The SNC is working through the contracting process that will allow us to administer and oversee the planning and implementation of a biomass facility and wood products campus, as well as the forest and watershed health projects identified in the application.

Tree Mortality Task Force

SNC staff are taking an active role in the Tree Mortality Task Force established by Governor Brown in October 2015 to implement the policies and projects set forth in his Tree Mortality Emergency Declaration. SNC participation includes development of more favorable policies for forest bioenergy and the establishment of log deck sites to store hazard trees for future use in biomass processing.

Forest Climate Action Team (FCAT)

The SNC staff continue to participate in the FCAT in a number of different workgroups. FCAT was formed under the direction and leadership of Governor Jerry Brown in August 2014, and is comprised of Executive level members from many of the state's natural resources agencies, state and federal forest land managers, and other key partners directly or indirectly involved in California forestry. The FCAT's primary purpose is developing a Forest Carbon Plan by the end of 2016.

Good Neighbor Authority

The U.S. Forest Service and CNRA signed a Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) master agreement, which will allow state entities within the CNRA to complement the work being done by USFS staff on California's national forests over the next 10 years. Supplemental agreements between national forests and CA agencies will specifically identify the work the state can perform on national forest system lands. The 2014 Farm Bill authorized GNA for the USFS and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The GNA allows the USFS to enter into agreements or contracts with states to perform forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration services on national forest system lands. It can leverage state resources to increase capacity to accomplish work on national forest system lands, and also enhances cooperative efforts and federal and state partnerships for landscape scale restoration and improvements. The agreement could help facilitate an increased ability to address California's tree mortality issue, pro-actively treat forests to help avoid large damaging wildfires, protect and restore California's watersheds, and increase ability to implement projects that reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and secure long-term carbon storage.

Science Synthesis

A science synthesis on the relationship between forest management and greenhouse gas emissions has been completed as a partnership between SNC, CAL FIRE, the USFS and other agencies has been shared with a variety of partner agencies and

stakeholders working on incorporating the forest sector into long-term GHG emissions reduction plans.

Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

An MOU was developed and signed by state and federal land managers, non-governmental organizations, and prescribed fire councils which captures a commitment to increase the use of fire for ecological and other benefits, and provides guidance developed by federal, state, local, and other stakeholders to address fire management across jurisdictions. The SNC is a signatory to the MOU ([Attachment A](#)) and is actively participating in its implementation.

Co-branded WIP website

The WIP Communications Team has been working on a co-branded, stand-alone web site for the WIP. The development of this site will allow us to highlight the WIP as a partnership between SNC and the USFS, and will allow the WIP to be seen as a large restoration program with clear goals and solid support from stakeholders. The launch of this new site is scheduled for late February/early March 2016 in conjunction with the WIP Summit on March 3.

Outreach Materials Development

The Communications Team developed new fact sheets and outreach materials that connect the WIP to the CA Headwaters Partnership, and outline successes to date. These materials were designed to show the progress that the WIP has made and highlight the value of the Program to the Region and the state. (Release date for these coincide with the March Summit.)

Funding

The SNC Funding Team has undertaken a number of activities in support of WIP objectives. Staff assisted the Yosemite-Sequoia RC&D in their successful application for approximately \$100,000 in CAL FIRE State Responsibility Area (SRA) Fire Prevention Funds for implementation of a log deck to take hazard trees at the North Fork mill site. This is a demonstration project which can be duplicated in other communities in response to the Tree Mortality disaster. Staff has also participated in the Tree Mortality Task Force to share information about bioenergy, fuel reduction funding resources, and policy issues. Staff also provided community capacity building, specifically through a grant writing workshop given for Plumas and Sierra Counties.

Sierra LiDAR Cooperative Discussion Group

SNC initiated support for a Sierra LiDAR cooperative discussion group to allow agencies and organizations to better coordinate data needs, resources, and funding opportunities. LiDAR is a remote sensing tool that can provide researchers with invaluable information regarding forest health, water supply, topographic information, and infrastructure location, all of which directly support WIP efforts.

Restoration Assessments

The SNC staff has continued to work to develop assessments for determining WIP restoration needs at the watershed level in lands across a variety of ownership. This includes close coordination with USFS, Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC), National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management staff throughout the Region.

USFS Region 5 has rolled out the WIP watershed assessment approach at the forest level, to answer the question of “What restoration projects need to be implemented in the next 10 years to return the watersheds of this forest to a state of ecological resilience?” The assessments will identify the work that is needed and could be done with additional resources/funding, as well as key constraints affecting needed restoration efforts. As a part of this process, the forests will also have a list of current planned forest restoration activities, which will include NEPA/CEQA-ready projects. This will help build an understanding what is currently planned, so a comparison can be made of the current pace of restoration versus what is actually needed or feasible. The end goal is to complete assessments on all National Forests in the Sierra Nevada by June 2016. The SNC staff and USFS Region 5 are also working with the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest to ensure they are included in the various aspects of the WIP.

The BLM and NPS have initiated watershed assessments on their lands, which when combined with the USFS forest assessments, will complete the picture of restoration needs on public lands in the Sierra Nevada, including but not limited to, meadow restoration, road sediment reduction treatments, aquatic organism passage, invasive species removal, hydraulic mining restoration, and forest health/fuels reduction treatments. The Placer Resource Conservation District, through the SCRMC Joint Powers Authority, has initiated watershed assessments for the private lands in [the 16 Watershed Assessment Areas under the WIP](#). The vast majority of these public and private lands assessments should be completed by early summer 2016.

Next Steps

Staff will work with the USFS and other partners to implement the Board-approved WIP Regional Strategy, updating as needed to reflect necessary course changes.

Once the assessment phase of the WIP is complete, we will have identified general information and needs for each Sierra watershed, as well as a better understanding of more overarching regional needs, opportunities, and challenges. With the help of diverse partners, assessments will be utilized to identify opportunities for project funding and critical policy areas in need of immediate action. This will include identification and consideration of successful models for delivering restoration activities, including the selection of at least two pilot watersheds for implementing these new restoration models on the ground.

The WIP has always recognized that the lack of wood- and biomass-processing infrastructure remains a significant impediment to forest restoration efforts. However, the rapidly escalating issue of tree mortality in the Sierra Nevada has thrown a spotlight on the need to enhance forest-related infrastructure so it can handle the pace and scale of needed restoration. [Governor Brown's Emergency Proclamation](#) on this issue clearly identified this need and provided direction to appropriate agencies to address it.

Staff and partners will continue to cement existing and cultivate new WIP partnerships by growing the list of [WIP supporters](#) and gathering information regarding their specific geographic and issue areas of most interest. Staff will also further its work in the four key areas of Policy, Funding, Communications, and Restoration Implementation. Staff will provide regular updates to the Board as to progress in the development and implementation of the WIP.

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.