

### **Background**

For more than six years, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has been actively involved in forest and community health issues. The Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI) was adopted by the SNC Governing 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 to restore forests to ecological health and improve local communities' social and economic well-being.

In March 2015, the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) was launched in partnership with the United States Forest Service (USFS) Region 5. 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 SNC is designated as the lead state agency for coordination and implementation of the WIP, and hosts an annual WIP Summit with key partners for discussions of current issues and strategies for more effectively implementing the WIP.

Due to the number of innovative efforts and partnerships underway in the Central Sierra/Tahoe region, SNC has identified the Tahoe-Central Sierra area as a large pilot landscape for the WIP, with a variety of specific "game-changer" demonstration opportunities in particular watersheds. SNC continues to co-lead and coordinate this Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI) with the California Tahoe Conservancy, working closely with USFS Region 5, the Eldorado and Tahoe national forests, and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. A number of other agency and organization partners are actively engaged, including The Nature Conservancy, the National Forest Foundation, Sagehen Experimental Forest, CAL FIRE, the California Forestry Association, and the University of California. A Memorandum of Understanding among the partners that captures the intent and commitment of the group was signed in March 2017, and updates will be provided to the board regarding their progress on an ongoing basis. While the TCSI watershed demonstration projects will receive staff and financial support from SNC, efforts will continue at the Regional level to pursue WIP objectives that will benefit the entire Region. These include increased investment, policy and process improvements, and increased infrastructure. The SNC will continue to fund projects and work with partners throughout the Region to further the purposes of the WIP.

The Watershed Information Network (WIN) for the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program is another important component of the WIP. The WIN provides an online environment to document resources, partners, successes, failures, lessons learned, needs, opportunities, and existing WIP-related efforts. It offers opportunities to test new ways of integrating the three pillars of the WIP (investment, policy, and infrastructure) in order to restore Sierra Nevada forests to a state of health and resilience. The WIN provides the information and background that set the stage for

telling the story of the overall Region, including a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) map portal which provides a user-friendly way to display data to the public.

Boardmembers Bob Johnston and Randy Fletcher serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the WIP effort.

### **Current Status**

#### *Funding Efforts*

At the March annual Watershed Improvement Program Summit, CAL FIRE Chief Ken Pimlott urged the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to convene a meeting of state agencies to discuss the development of a Sierra Nevada Strategic Investment Plan. With the state financial resources currently available, significant progress can be made, but a more coordinated approach is needed. The purpose of the plan is to develop a more effective way for state agencies to invest funds in a strategic, coordinated, and impactful manner. The effort is not intended to usurp any organization's priorities or initiatives, but rather to determine how to better leverage and coordinate state investment. Given the substantial amount of funding available, and the potential for more funding from this year's ballot measures, there is unique opportunity to significantly move Sierra Nevada watersheds towards health and resilience and achieve a number of state policy objectives. At the time of the writing of this report, this meeting had been scheduled for May 24 in Sacramento. An update on the outcomes of this meeting will be provided at the Board meeting.

The SNC staff is also playing an important role in supporting organizations in the Sierra Nevada Region beyond distributing SNC grant funds. For instance, staff is assisting a group in the South-Central Sub Region in the development of their Southern Sierra All-Lands Restoration and Recovery Program Forest Health Concept Proposal for CAL FIRE's Climate Change Investment grant program. Upon hearing that multiple entities in this Subregion were considering applying for CCI funds, SNC staff worked with Mariposa County Supervisor Rosemarie Smallcombe to coordinate multiple projects into one application. Main parties included the Sierra National Forest, Yosemite National Park, Pacific Southwest Research Station, University of Washington, and Mariposa County. At the time of the writing of this report, the group had been invited by CAL FIRE to submit a full proposal for this concept proposal.

Staff also continues to monitor funding being invested throughout the Sierra Nevada Region by other agencies. A more detailed presentation on those findings to date will be provided at the Board meeting. See [Attachment A](#) (State Funding Awards Tables).

#### *Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative*

The SNC staff continues to be actively involved with seeking funding for projects that have completed the planning and environmental review process in the TCSI landscape. The SNC recently submitted a concept proposal to CAL FIRE's 2018 Climate Change Investment Program (CCI) for almost \$11 million in projects in the TCSI area, including

projects on the Eldorado National Forest and the French Meadows project on the Tahoe National Forest. Though there are several TCSI applicants for these CCI funds, the applications are being linked through the TCSI, and SNC is leading the effort to keep these applications and projects coordinated. At the time of the writing of this report, most of these linked applications had been invited by CAL FIRE to submit full proposals.

The TCSI partners are currently evaluating opportunities for funding and implementing other coordinated restoration on this landscape, with a focus on innovative efforts with the potential to leverage landscape-scale restoration on public and private lands within the TCSI region. SNC is also making presentations to counties and Resource Conservation Districts in the TCSI area in a first wave of outreach to share information and explore opportunities for increased partnerships on this landscape.

#### *Comparative Resilience Workshop*

The SNC is partnering with the California Tahoe Conservancy (CTC) to coordinate a technical workshop being convened by the TCSI Steering Committee in mid-June. This workshop is designed to begin building consensus around what constitutes a resilient forest landscape. The four goals of the workshop include (1) share information about the analytical and modeling approaches that TCSI's six constitutive forest collaboratives are taking toward resilience, (2) review a proposal for desired landscape outcomes that could be common to the entire 2.4 million-acre TCSI landscape, (3) identify consistent metrics and methods where feasible, and (4) discuss how such outcomes can be used to build support and awareness for TCSI.

#### *Southern Sierra Leadership Forum*

Southern Sierra resource managers are dealing with novel threats under unprecedented conditions and with an uncertain future. Drought- and pest-driven tree mortality has transformed the Southern Sierra landscape, with unknown impacts on habitat, carbon, timber resources and fire behavior. High-severity fires are occurring with a frequency and size not seen in the historical record. Swift, collaborative action is needed to restore the health of this iconic landscape. The SNC convened the leaders of state and federal agencies through the Southern Sierra Leadership Forum on May 2 and 3 to discuss issues facing this landscape and collaborative opportunities to protect and restore Southern Sierra public lands. There was strong support among the participants to continue to work together through this collaborative effort, with a number of short-term opportunities identified in the initial meeting. SNC will continue to play an active role in the facilitation of this group as it organizes itself.

#### **Next Steps**

The SNC staff will continue to work with other state agencies to increase investment in the Region, with an eye toward the June ballot and outcome of the "Park Bond," and the development of the Sierra Nevada Strategic Investment Plan, which will create a more holistic and strategic approach to restoring watershed health and resilience.

The SNC will continue to encourage and direct the momentum of the TCSI partners to implement coordinated restoration in the TCSI area, with a focus on innovative efforts with the potential to leverage landscape-scale restoration on public and private lands. This work will develop the TCSI as the initial landscape for the WIP Pilot Watershed efforts. TCSI partners will also continue to share information and explore opportunities for increased partnerships on this landscape.

The SNC staff will continue to work in a variety of active roles in various local collaborative efforts, as well as several task forces and teams to move WIP objectives forward, including but not limited to the Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force, the Forest Climate Action Team, and a team working on the implementation of the Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding. Staff will provide regular updates to the Board as to progress in the development and implementation of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program.

**Recommendation**

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