

**Sierra Nevada Conservancy-Progress Report**

**Sierra Nevada Conservancy Grant Program  
Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control  
River and Coastal Protection Act of 2006 (Proposition 84)**

**Grantee Name:** American Rivers

**Project title:** Ackerson Meadows: Keystone Habitat for Great Gray Owls

**SNC Reference Number:** SNC 427

**Submittal Date:** 2/28/2014

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**Check one:**

**6-Month Progress Report**

**Final Report**

<p><b>6-Month Progress Reports</b> should reflect the previous six months. <b>Final Reports</b> should reflect the entire grant period.</p>
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**A. Progress Report Summary:** (Please provide a general description of work completed during this reporting period.)

The goal of this grant was to accelerate acquisition of the privately owned Ackerson Meadow property, which although a top conservation priority for decades, was still at risk of development. The Ackerson property is a core site for the California population of Great Gray Owls—three territories overlap at the meadow. In addition, the property borders Yosemite National Park and the Stanislaus National Forest, and Ackerson Creek is the headwaters of the South Fork Tuolumne River.

To evaluate the primary ecological values at the site and identify restoration needs, American Rivers conducted a hydroecological assessment of the meadow (attached) and subgranted to the Institute for Bird Populations for an avian assessment.

American Rivers also subgranted to the Pacific Forest Trust, an organization that had prior experience with the Ackerson Meadow landowners and is a leader in conserving land around Yosemite. Unfortunately, the Pacific Forest Trust was unable to secure an option with the landowners, and the apparent disengagement on the part of the landowners convinced the Pacific Forest Trust to pursue other projects and discontinued their involvement. The outcome of their work was development of a template for a purchase option that is described in a final report they prepared for SNC (attached).

American Rivers was granted an extension and contacted the landowner. We established rapport through our joint connections in the conservation community, our long-term love of the Tuolumne watershed, and our enthusiasm to see a place as special as Ackerson protected. We contacted the park superintendent to confirm Yosemite's interest in acquiring the property, if possible, and their positive response further galvanized the landowner's support for conservation. After we built strong conservation momentum with the

landowner, we reached out to the Pacific Forest Trust to confirm that we should work with a different partner. We then asked the Trust for Public Lands (TPL) to lead acquisition. We set up meetings between TPL and the landowner to discuss possible sale terms and strategy, and agreed that appraisal was the next step. We decided upon an appraiser, used by TPL in the past, and agreed to split the appraisal cost equally with the landowners. We then met with Yosemite and U.S. National Park Service (Park Service) staff at the meadow and discussed options going forward. Park staff was initially skeptical that the landowners would seriously consider conservation, after years of inaction, but the landowners' arrival and enthusiasm (they gave us keys to the property) that afternoon gave us all hope that we would be successful. The Park Service suggested that it might be possible for the Park to directly acquire the property without going through a second party and waiting for congressional approval, as long as federal funds are not used, so partners are hopeful that acquisition will be streamlined.

TPL and the landowners agreed on sale terms and signed a purchase option. The appraisal was completed and identified a workable price, and currently partners have until October 2014 to raise acquisition funds.

During this project, the Rim Fire burned through Ackerson Meadow, and the property was a principle staging area for fire fighters protecting Evergreen Lodge and Hetch Hetchy. This reduced the appraised price, and caused much concern, but ultimately it brought the team together and did not substantially slow progress.

**B. Deliverables or Outcomes completed during this Reporting Period or Milestones Achieved:** (Include specific information, such as public meetings held, agency participation, partnerships developed, or acres mapped, treated or restored.)

Primary outcomes are underlined and supporting deliverables are bulleted below.

Relationship with landowner is very strong and they are committed to see their meadow transferred to Yosemite

- Multiple meetings held with landowners both on site, at their home, at the Hunt cabin, and places in between
- Meetings held with Park Service staff, project partners, and the landowners at Ackerson meadow
- Landowners reviewed Ecological Assessments (see below)
- Sale terms agreed upon verbally with strong support from all partners (also see below)

Ecological Assessments Complete

- Avian assessments complete by Institute for Bird Populations (a sensitive report that maps nest trees and sightings is not included; however, a more general map is included in the deliverables)
- Ecohydrology report completed by American Rivers, including surveyed channel cross sections, hydrologic modelling and a comparative assessment of Ackerson Meadow and neighboring South Meadow
- Post-Rim Fire pictorial comparison prepared by TPL

- Assessment of post-Rim Fire remediation measures conducted by American Rivers

Appraisal and Agreements in Place

- Purchase option in place
- Appraisal complete and price is acceptable to all
- TPL and Park Service are working on fundraising with substantial support offered from earlier acquisition attempts

**C. Challenges or Opportunities Encountered:** (Please describe what has worked and what hasn't; include any solutions you initiated to resolve problems. If your project is not on schedule, please explain why here.)

As described above, the project initially failed to gain traction with the landowner. This had been experienced before in multiple acquisition attempts, so the partnership had some expectation that this could be just the next failure. I hesitate to write that this was a miracle, but all conservation work is miraculous and full of synergy and this project is no exception. My personal common ground with the landowner and our interconnected web of fantastic people enabled progress to be made that we all hope will lead to ultimate conservation by the Park Service.

In addition to the acquisition-related challenges, the Rim Fire threatened the meadow and was a major concern. However, the meadow (especially the South Meadow) benefitted from the burn. The fire-fighting staging caused impacts, but these were repaired by US Forest Service (USFS) restoration teams. Damage to timber stands affected the appraised value; however, the value is within the bounds set by the purchase option. Conversations about the Rim Fire and the uncertainty felt by everyone for both the meadow and the landowner's and Hunt family cabins ultimately drew us together.

**D. Unanticipated Successes Achieved:** (Please describe any additional successes beyond completing scheduled tasks or meeting scheduled milestones.)

Despite initial challenges around acquisition, purchase terms have been agreed upon, an option is in place, and fundraising has begun. The option formally ends in October 2014, and partners anticipate that acquisition will be rapid. In addition, we have strong cooperation from Yosemite, the Park Service, and the landowners. We have moved well beyond the project goals of assessment and appraisal down the road toward acquisition.

**E. Compare Actual Costs to Budgeted Costs:** (Please refer to your grant agreement to list your deliverables/budget categories and budgeted costs compared to actual costs incurred during this reporting period in the table below.)

<b>Project Budget Categories</b>	<b>Budgeted SNC Dollars</b>	<b>Actual Dollars</b>
Staff/Personnel Expense	15,974.35	36,836
Travel/Meeting Expense	2,000.00	3,000
Sub-grants/Contracts/Consultants	24,600.00	20,485

Materials/Supplies	110.00	400
Equipment Leases/Purchases	1,036.33	0
Fees:		
Appraisal/Permits/CEQA/Easement	17,000.00	0
Performance Measure Reporting	2,237.00	2,237
Administrative Costs	2,042.32	2,042
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>65,000.00</b>	<b>65,000</b>

**Explanation:** (if needed)

American Rivers completed much of the work we anticipated contracting, as described above. In addition, we split the appraisal cost with the landowner, and the appraisal was managed by TPL, so this cost was borne under the subgrant line item. TPL took on the project and their costs were covered with other funds.

**F. Do you have information to report on the project-specific Performance Measures for your project?** (If so, please list the Performance Measures below and describe your progress.)

Details are provided in the Final Report Performance Measures section, below.

**G. Were there any other relevant materials produced under the terms of this Agreement that are not a part of the budgeted deliverables? If so, please attach copies.** (Include digital photos, maps, media coverage of project, or other work products.)

Although we have not yet not sought press coverage for this work, as it is still underway, we produced materials such as blog posts and other documents. For example, TPL prepared a post-fire photographic comparison, and American Rivers collected Rim Fire pictures of the site from the press. All are attached.

**H. Next Steps:** (Work anticipated in the next 6 months, including location and timing of any scheduled events related to the project.)

The primary next step for the project is for our partners to fundraise for acquisition. We expect to continue communication with the project partners and the landowner about acquisition by or transfer to Yosemite National Park.

**Please Complete this Section for FINAL Report ONLY**

**Capacity-Building Results and Collaboration and Cooperation with Stakeholders:**

(What partnerships did you initiate or strengthen as a result of this project? How did they affect the project outcome? If applicable, how did this grant increase your organization's capacity? What is your plan to sustain this increase?)

Strong partnerships were built as a result of this project between TPL and American Rivers. This had a substantially beneficial impact on the project outcome, as it made it possible for us to move forward toward acquisition when it seemed this would not be possible.

Additionally, relationships with the Park Service were strengthened among all partners. Finally, a strong partnership with the landowner was built. Not only did the strong relationships with the Park Service and the landowners ensure successful outcomes in this project, they will also provide a solid foundation for moving forward with the acquisition.

Looking forward to possible restoration of Ackerson meadow, the grant built our partnership with the restoration and science staff at the Park Service, Institute for Bird Populations and the USFS.

The grant also helped American Rivers initiate floodplain protection work in the Delta with TPL that was ultimately completed with other partners, but we anticipate working with TPL elsewhere in California.

## **Description of Project Accomplishments:**

### **1. Most Significant Accomplishment**

*Describe in one concise, well-written paragraph, the most significant accomplishment that resulted from this grant.*

This grant enabled us to move Ackerson Meadow toward protection by Yosemite National Park. We were able to accomplish this with SNC support, despite decades of acquisition attempts that never gained any traction. None even progressed to the stage of personal landowner contact, much less appraisal, agreement on sale terms, Park Service involvement and enthusiasm for conservation of the meadow. We feel fortunate that SNC catalyzed so much progress, and that grant manager Brandon Sanders allowed American Rivers to extend the grant term, even when prospects were uncertain and some hopes had dwindled.

### **2. WOW Factor**

*If applicable, please describe anything that happened as a result of the project or during the project that is particularly impressive.*

The Rim Fire burned the area, and there are some amazing photos of staging, the burned area, and the initially rapid recovery.

There is more support from the landowner than anyone dared hope for.

One vignette: I was walking back to the truck across Ackerson Meadow with Park Superintendent Don Neubacher. He was reminding me in a gentle way that this was a project that had seen many failed attempts, and that although no one had gotten this far yet, we were hardly out of the woods. As we approached the trucks, the landowner arrived and ran over and gave me a giant bear hug, gave us keys to the new locks he had put on the gate and thanked us for being there. Later, talking through the truck window, the superintendent said, "Luke, I think this one is a go." I deeply respect both men, and I'll never forget that meeting.

A second vignette: On my way to our family Thanksgiving in Tuolumne county, I stopped with my two-year-old, Jake, and my dad (pictured holding the prism in photos of the hydroecology report) to finish some surveying of the Ackerson channel. As we walked into

South Meadow, a Great Gray Owl took flight right above us and coasted the length of the meadow. It was then that I was filled with hope—hope that I still draw upon, when times are uncertain for other conservation work. This event is described in the attached blog.

### **3. Design and Implementation**

*When considering the design and implementation of this project, what lessons did you learn that might help other grantees implement similar work?*

Stories such as the vignettes that I shared above really brought an incredible team together around an audacious goal: adding a keystone property to Yosemite. I am not an acquisitions professional, but I would recommend not going through attorneys, if possible, but rather talking to the landowners directly and establishing a heart-connection.

### **4. Indirect Impact**

*Please describe any indirect benefits of the project such as information that has been developed as a result of the project is being used by several other organizations to improve decision-making, or a conservation easement funded by this grant that encouraged other landowners in the area to have conservation easements on their property.*

A conservation easement is also being considered for Stone Meadow, as a result of this project. Stone meadow also hosts a Great Gray Owl territory, and with Ackerson, is the largest meadow in the vicinity.

### **5. Collaboration and Conflict Resolution**

*If you worked in collaboration or cooperation with other organizations or institutions, describe those arrangements and their importance to the project. Also, describe if you encountered conflict in the project and how you dealt with it, or if there was conflict avoided as a result of the project.*

Our partnerships were established through careful subgrants prepared by American Rivers. This enabled us to clearly spell out expectations, so when one partner decided to exit, the project could continue. The project really gained momentum when carefully considered individuals from organizations became involved. Once I met the landowner, it became clear that people needed to love their work to the point that it was fun and worth sharing in personal stories. This became the team selection criterion.

### **6. Capacity-Building**

*SNC is interested in both the capacity of your organization, as well as local and regional capacity. Please describe the overall health of your organization including areas in need of assistance. SNC is interested in the strength and involvement of your board, significant changes to your staff, size and involvement of membership. In addition, describe how your project improved capabilities of partners, or the larger community.*

American Rivers is a robust national organization, and the work of the California regional office is critical to realizing the larger organization's mission and goals. Additionally, there is a general trend of growth in the California office—in the past few years our conservation staff has increased from two to ten. This growth is successfully supported through a strong grants program, effective cooperation with our national office, and active engagement of local donors and supporters. We have expanded multiple program areas to include additional

projects, particularly our headwaters restoration program. Membership remains strong, with AR having 200,000 supporters, members, and volunteers nationwide. American Rivers has increasingly taken on a leadership role in realm of Sierra meadow restoration, with an increased emphasis on growing the meadow restoration movement and acting as mentor to other organizations wishing to implement their own projects.

Funding from SNC for this project has increased American Rivers' capacity to work with a variety of partners, and it stretched our role of river protection into key headwaters habitat. One challenge we have faced is in obtaining funds associated with bigger picture planning work, such as funding to address water rights issues associated with meadow restoration, building on nascent corporate partnerships in support of restoration, or state-level policy work on instream flow dedication. We believe addressing these types of issues are essential to large-scale restoration and conservation, but have had difficulty funding work to date.

This project has also improved the capabilities of our partners as described above under Capacity Building and Collaboration with Stakeholders.

## **7. Challenges**

*Did the project face internal or external challenges? How were they addressed? Describe each challenge and any actions that you took to address it. Was there something that SNC did or could have done to assist you? Did you have to change any of your key objectives in response to conditions "on the ground"?*

This is described under (C) Challenges above. SNC staff were very helpful dealing with a changing budget and evolving partnerships.

## **8. Photographs**

*Grantees are strongly encouraged to submit photos, slides or digital images whenever possible. These images will be used for SNC publications such as annual reports or on the website. Please make sure you clearly identify location, activity, and your project with each submitted image. Images will be credited to the submitting organization, unless specified otherwise.*

Attached.

## **9. Post Grant Plans**

*What are the post-grant plans for the project if it does not conclude with the grant? Include a description of the following (if applicable): (1) Changes in operations or scope; (2) Replication or use of findings; (3) Names of other organizations you expect to involve; (4) Plans to support the project financially, and; (5) Communication plans?*

We expect Ackerson Meadow to become part of Yosemite National Park. Currently, we are working on advancing restoration in the meadow, based on findings in the ecological assessments. Before the Rim Fire, we had hoped to pursue restoration and acquisition fundraising simultaneously, but agency restoration staff is tied up with fire restoration, so we will anticipate beginning restoration planning in earnest in 2015.

## **10. Post Grant Contact**

*Who can be contacted a few years from now to follow up on the project? Please provide name and contact information.*

Luke Hunt  
 Director of Headwaters Conservation  
 American Rivers  
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**SNC-approved Performance Measures:** (Please list each Performance Measure for your Project, as identified in your Grant Agreement, and the results/outcomes.)

Performance Measures

1. Resources leveraged in the Sierra Nevada:

- \$5,000 in landowner contribution toward appraisal
- Estimated 200 hours of landowner and their attorneys’ time in support of the project
- Park Service contribution estimated at 60 hours.
- Acquisition funds of \$2.7 million anticipated.

2. Number and Diversity of People Reached:

- Conservation Groups/Individuals: 5 groups, 10 individuals  
 (Institute for Bird Populations, Yosemite Conservancy, Soda Mountain Wilderness Council, Sierra Foothill Conservancy, Trust for Public Land)
- Government Officials: 15 individuals (USFS, National Park Service)
- Sierra Nevada Residents: 20 individuals
- 120 people reached through American Rivers’ blog.

3. Number and Type of Jobs Created:

<b>Occupational group</b>	<b>Number of people employed</b>	<b>Length of employment</b>	<b>Average number of hours worked/week</b>	<b>Total FTEs</b>	<b>Employment season</b>
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	4	50 weeks	5.5	.9	All year

4. Number and Value of New, Improved or Preserved Economic Activities:

- One service improved if acquisition is completed: recreation, including birding, which is popular on the USFS-owned portion of the meadow.

5. Number of Significant Sites Protected or Preserved:

- One 415-acre property, including portions of two meadows with significant ecological and cultural resources.