

## 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 2008 (Proposition 84)

**Grantee Name:** Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT)

**Project title:** East Walker River Assessment and Watershed Plan

**SNC Reference Number:** G0753002      **Submittal Date:** March 2, 2012

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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 Watershed Assessment and Plan for the East Walker River have been completed. The reports have been bound and printed, and digital copies have been burned to labeled Compact Disks (CDs). Although a copy of these reports are being provided to SNC as part of this grant report package, ESLT plans to temporarily hold-off on widely distributing these materials due timing and sensitivity to matters related to the primary water quality concern that is further described under item C "Challenges or Opportunities Encountered" below.

- 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.)

The remaining deliverables as described by the Project Schedule of Exhibit A have all been completed. These items include defining methods for achieving and sustaining water quality improvements, collaborating with willing parties to identify potentially effective projects, identifying recommended conservation measures, and discussing funding for future projects and practices. Stakeholder outreach with willing parties to identify potential issues and projects included a paper survey, attendance and discussion at public planning meetings, conversations and interviews with selected landowners and other individuals, as well as interviews with staff of the Mono County Community Development Department. The results of this work are described in further detail in the Watershed Plan.

**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.)

The assessment concluded that the East Walker River watershed had relatively minor problems compared to other parts of California. Therefore, the plan does not have much basis for action programs to address significant issues. Many of the proposed actions in the plan seem rather trivial compared with much more serious problems elsewhere in the state. The funding climate for watershed work has changed drastically since the proposal was submitted in 2008. As a consequence, there are few potential sources of funds for the plan to suggest at the present time. The primary water quality issue within the watershed (fecal coliform within the Bridgeport Valley) became quite contentious during the final months of this project. The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board will make a decision about its approach to the issue in April 2012. Because of this pending decision and potential legal and political challenges, the plan was written so as to defer to the eventual outcome of this controversy.

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

Although it is perhaps early to report it as a success, at the time that the reports were completed is significant momentum in the watershed for future land conservation and habitat improvement projects related to the greater sage-grouse, a species that is considered eligible for endangered status. Several Federal agencies are interested in funded work that will protect and enhance habitat for this species. ESLT is optimistic about working with these agencies, private landowner, and hopefully identifying necessary matching funds to complete projects in the watershed. The current round of SNC grant funds may be a good match for such a project. Additionally, in the time since this SNC grant funded project was started, ESLT has completed an additional agricultural easement with the owners of Centennial Ranch in the Bridgeport Valley. This brings the total acreage of land under easement in the valley to more than 7,000 or almost 1/3 of the private agricultural lands on the valley floor.

**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>
<b>Salary for watershed specialists</b>	52,625	51,872.50
<b>Land Stewardship Coordinator</b>	10,810	10,261.22
<b>Executive Director</b>	5,550	4,939.47
<b>Supplies &amp; Materials</b>	1,875	1,596.47
<b>Administration</b>	11,000	10,492.29
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>81,860</b>	<b>79,161.95</b>

**Explanation:** (if needed)

ESLT successful managed to utilize 96.7% of the grant award, with less than \$3,000 dollars remaining on the grant at the end of the term despite the fact that the grant spanned a nearly 5 year period of time which included the unfortunate bond freeze. The remaining largest amount of remaining funding was located in the contracts category for watershed specialists; the reasons for this are described in the “Challenges” section of the “Description of Project Accomplishments” below.

**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.)

The Performance Measures for this project are fully discussed in the Final Report section of this grant report.

**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.)

The primary deliverables produced under the terms of this grant are the watershed assessment and plan as described in of the grant agreement. As part of the ‘Describe agricultural lands and examine opportunities for their long-term conservation’ item of the Project Scope (Exhibit A) for the watershed assessment, ESLT produced a written description completed a written “Overview of Private Agricultural Lands” which is included in the assessment as appendix 2. Due to the sensitivity of working with private landowners in the watershed it was determined not to be appropriate to identify specific potential private land conservation projects in the assessment or plan due to the public nature of those documents. As a result, using the information gained though the process of stakeholder outreach, discussions with local land management and planning agencies, and geographic spatial analysis techniques, ESLT also prepared a priority agricultural lands assessment that uses maps and tables to identify

priority properties for potential future conservation projects pending landowner interest and funding opportunities. This planning will be invaluable to our organization's ability to undertake future land conservation projects in the watershed.

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

Beyond the end of the formal project, the Eastern Sierra Land Trust intends to complete the distribution the assessment and plan. The plan will be delivered to the State and Federal agencies that are active in our region, Mono County, as well as other public and private stakeholders that have been identified throughout the region. The documents will also be made publicly available online, by CD, and in hard copy available at public libraries. ESLT hopes that County and will eventually implement aspects of the plan. The assessment will likely be associated by reference into the county's Master Environmental Assessment as have the other watershed assessments completed in 2008. The assessment and plan will also be made available for general use through the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group's website where a library of similar materials is maintained online.

## **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?)

As was the case with the earlier watershed assessments within Mono County, our attempts in personal information gathering were met with limited success. This is largely due to the low population of the region, as well a sensitivity to discuss issues related to water for a number of reasons. However, a number of key stakeholders were interviewed and a written survey was also distributed and considered in the reports. Now that physical products are available for review (and that are presumably non-threatening), we hope that a variety of stakeholders will be more forthcoming with information that will improve future updates.

As people within the watershed realize that the plan is a necessary pre-requisite for some types of state funding for watershed improvements (if and when such funds become available again), we hope that interested stakeholders will appreciate ESLT's work in this regard and partner with us on future land conservation projects within the watershed.

One other effort which began during this grant project and has become an important collaboration is the Inyo Mono Regional Water Management Group. The Inyo-Mono Group was successful in obtaining state funds for a variety of water infrastructure projects around the region in the current funding cycle. There is the possibility that future funding opportunities could have broader objectives that might include watershed improvement. The group has agreed to share the East Walker Watershed assessment and plan in their digital library, housed on their website [<http://inyomonowater.org/library/>] where the previous watershed assessments can currently be found.

### **Description of Project Accomplishments:**

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

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

The comprehensive assessment of watershed conditions provides a solid resource for researching issues related to the hydrology, water quality, and land use of the East Walker River watershed within California. The assessment should serve as a basic reference for environmental information about the study area.

#### **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 East Walker River watershed appears to be in much better condition than most areas of California and to have fewer problems than anticipated at the beginning of the project.

### **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?

One important lesson learned on this project has been to identify potential collaborations early on. Collaboration with the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group was particularly valuable due to the fact that we were able to work with them on some of the stakeholder outreach and participation aspects of this project. It was extremely valuable that the primary contractor on this project had considerable experience with conducting previous watershed assessments and was able to draw on this experience with the design and implementation of the project.

### **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.

Due to the fact that the assessment and plan have yet to be released, it is too early to report on indirect benefits of the information being used by other organizations and decision makers, although such benefits are expected. The primary indirect benefits that have occurred at this point relate to expanded relationships with partners and potential partners in the region that were initiated during the stakeholder outreach portion of this project. ESLT hopes that no negative indirect impacts occur as a result of some of the sensitive issues discussed in the reports.

### **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.

There is a potentially major conflict simmering between the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and ranching operations within the Bridgeport Valley. The assessment summarizes the publicly available state of knowledge about the issues, and the plan defers to the eventual outcomes of the regulatory process.

### **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.

As is the case with most nonprofits, ESLT continues to work hard to secure funding for its work during these soft economic times and reductions in funding sources. General membership has remained healthy with good renewals levels and an active volunteer program. Board leadership is strong but focused on recruiting new blood at both the board and committee level. We have reduced some staff hours within our organization in response to the economy and are extremely careful in monitoring all operational expenses. Our service area has a population base of only 30,000 people. ESLT continues to reach out and seek new members beyond its immediate service area.

Staffing is very stable with most staff members having been with ESLT for several years. The organization is led by a strong Executive Director who has been with the organization since its inception 11 years ago.

Through the process of stakeholder outreach this project allowed ESLT to expand and develop relationships with key stakeholders in the community. Although public response may not have been as strong as we would have liked, the conversations about the future of the watershed that occurred with Mono County, Bureau of Land Management, the California Dept. of Fish & Game, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and others are expected to lead to further collaborations that benefit the watershed.

## **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”?

One of the primary challenges faced on this project was stakeholder outreach and input from members of the public. Water in the Eastern Sierra and the American West in general has a long history of being a sensitive and controversial topic. This is perhaps more true in the East Walker Watershed than many other locations – due to current proceedings with the Lahontan Regional Quality Control Board, the water rights leasing/purchase program related to Walker Lake in Nevada, and other factors described in this assessment. For these reasons, in addition to the small year-round population of the watershed, it has been challenging to get very much public input, and has also made ESLT feel the need to handle the announcement and distribution of the completed reports with care.

## **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.

A compact disk (CD) of photographs of the watershed is included with this report. If used, please credit Rick Kattelmann. Graphics and photos in the report may be duplicated by SNC as well. Additional images, or color version can be made available to SNC by request.

#### **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?

Beyond the end of the formal project, the Eastern Sierra Land Trust intends to complete the distribution the assessment and plan. The plan will be delivered to the State and Federal agencies that are active in our region, Mono County, as well as other public and private stakeholders that have been identified throughout the region. The documents will also be made publicly available online, by CD, and in hard copy available at public libraries. ESLT hopes that County and will eventually implement aspects of the plan. The assessment will likely be associated by reference into the county's Master Environmental Assessment as have the other watershed assessments completed in 2008. The assessment and plan will also be made available for general use through the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group's website where a library of similar materials is maintained online.

#### **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.

Aaron Johnson  
Lands Director  
(760) 873-4554  
aaron@eslt.org

**SNC-approved Performance Measures:** (Please list each Performance Measure for your Project, as identified in your Grant Agreement, and the results/outcomes.)

#### **1. Resources leveraged:**

**a. Resources leveraged to complete this Project (matching funds, in kind contributions, etc.).**

By its nature, this project relied on formally-published scientific literature and operational reports of various kinds. More than 200 cited reports and publications provided the essential knowledge resources for extraction and compilation used in the assessment. The recent studies by the University of Nevada, Desert Research Institute, and other collaborators under the auspices of the Walker River Restoration Program were particularly helpful. Assessments for other watersheds in Mono County were a very useful model for organizing the information relevant to the East Walker River.

**b. Resources leveraged as a result of this Project.**

This is yet to be seen; once the reports have been made available to stakeholders ESLT expects that leveraging of funds will occur as potential projects are implemented.

**2. Impact on collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders:**

**a. Number of people/entities involved in Project.**

Members of the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group, which is a collaborative effort by design, were kept informed of progress as well as solicited for information. A presentation about this project was also made to the Bridgeport Regional Planning Advisory Committee (RPAC). Numerous individuals were contacted for additional information regarding the watershed including members of the public, landowners, ranchers, business owners, and agency personnel. This was accomplished using a written survey as well as selected interviews. Additionally, through the review of relevant scientific literature a large number of scientists indirectly have contributed to this report.

**b. Increased cooperation/ decreased conflict among stakeholders.**

None known to date. As described elsewhere in this report there are a few important issues that are coming forward at the moment, hopefully the information available in this report will be of some assistance.

**3. Capacity building within region:**

**a. Description of how completion of this Project improved capabilities of grant recipients, partners, or larger community.**

As a result of this project, the Eastern Sierra Land Trust has an improved understanding of resource issues within part of its service area. Specifically, the conservation planning portion of the project will greatly help future efforts in the geographic area. Mono County should be able to use portions of the assessment for the next update of its Master Environmental Assessment. The Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group will use information from the assessment in its current revision of its plan for water resources for the region.

#### **4. One-page description of Project accomplishments:**

##### **a. Description of how the project succeeded in accomplishing its intent and the direct benefits that resulted from the Project.**

The comprehensive assessment of watershed conditions provides a solid resource for researching issues related to the hydrology, water quality, and land use of the East Walker River watershed within California. The assessment should serve as a basic reference for environmental information about the study area. The completed plan is a requirement for some types of state funding for watershed work.

Using the information gained through the process of stakeholder outreach, discussions with local land management and planning agencies, and geographic spatial analysis techniques, ESLT also prepared a priority agricultural lands assessment that uses maps and tables to identify priority properties for potential future conservation projects pending landowner interest and funding opportunities. This planning will be invaluable to our organization's ability to undertake future land conservation projects in the watershed.

##### **b. Description of the follow-on or indirect benefits of the Project.**

The compilation of information should allow others to avoid doing the same basic investigations within the watershed. As people realize that the plan is a necessary prerequisite for some types of state funding for watershed improvements (if and when such funds become available again), individuals, groups, and agencies will be able to apply for such funding with that requirement taken care of. We also hope that interested stakeholders will appreciate the ESLT's work in this regard and partner with us on future land conservation projects within the watershed.

##### **c. Description of any significant positive experiences and unanticipated occurrences, or other noteworthy events that happened during the Project and anything about the project that gives you "goose bumps."**

The East Walker River watershed appears to be in much better condition than most areas of California and to have fewer problems than anticipated at the beginning of the project.

##### **d. Description of lessons learned during the course of completing the Project.**

One important lesson learned on this project has been to identify potential collaborations early on. Collaboration with the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group was particularly valuable due to the fact that we were able to work with them on some of the stakeholder outreach and participation aspects of this project. It was extremely valuable that the primary contractor on this project had considerable experience with conducting previous watershed assessments and was able to draw on this experience with the design and implementation of the project.

**5. Define the number of opportunities for relevant stakeholders to provide input and describe the level of stakeholder input incorporated into the final plan.**

Eastern Sierra Land Trust staff took great efforts to make sure that as many of the key stakeholders in the watershed had opportunities to provide input regarding the watershed. This included conducting early interviews with Mono County planning staff and ESLT contacts in the watershed including private individuals as well as State and Federal agency staff. ESLT also provided opportunities for information sharing in meetings such as the Regional Planning Advisory Committee (RPAC). Based on the list of key stakeholders that was developed from these efforts ESLT distributed a written survey by mail (with return postage paid envelope) as well as making copies available at the county planning office in Bridgeport. Stakeholders that were determined to be of particular importance were also contacted in person, by phone, or email, if more information was necessary.

The consultant was able to take advantage of outreach meetings organized by the Inyo-Mono Regional Water Management Group in Bridgeport to ask resource professionals and private citizens about water issues they were concerned about. The consultant also spoke with numerous individuals including landowners, ranchers, agency personnel, fishermen, hikers, etc. All information obtained through personal contacts contributed to the assessment and plan.

**6. Describe quantifiable characteristics, to be implemented once the plan is adopted, for water quality improvements.**

As stated in the plan: Considering the high degree of variability in the hydrologic systems of the East Walker River watershed, episodic nature of events that may alternatively exacerbate or ameliorate certain water quality problems, and high cost of an adequate monitoring program, we strongly believe that quantitative targets for water quality improvements are unreasonable, illogical, and ultimately counterproductive with respect to the waste of funds that could go toward treating the underlying problem instead. There are, of course, exceptions and counter-examples to this opinion, but we contend that the quest for rigorous quantitative targets be thoroughly evaluated with respect to costs and benefits.

**7. Report the estimated amount of funds to be raised to implement the projects and practices.**

No funds will be raised as a direct result of the project. The plan proposes a range of projects that have funding needs to be implemented. Beneficiaries or public entities would need to raise those funds.