

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.

The SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council (Coordinating Council) was formed under SNC's leadership. Representatives on the Coordinating Council include a wide range of diverse perspectives including local government, environmental and conservation organizations, the wood products industry, fire safe councils, community organizations, recreational groups, and public land management agencies. At the same time, a number of local collaborative efforts with objectives consistent with SNFCI have begun in the Region. The SNC has provided substantial financial and staff support to many of these collaboratives and was instrumental in the creation of several of them. Shortly after this initiative began, the United States Forest Service (USFS) Region 5 released its "Leadership Intent for Ecological Restoration" which articulated the need to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration. This document is consistent with SNFCI and has helped to further bring parties together on the many challenges that we face in achieving our objectives. The USFS has been and continues to be a key partner in furthering the objectives of SNFCI.

At the June 2014 Board meeting, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures that the issues being addressed under SNFCI were the organization's top priority. In response to this direction, the [State of Sierra Nevada's Forests Report](#), which represents our best understanding of current forest conditions and potential consequences at this time, was developed by staff and approved by the Board at the September 2014 Board meeting. At the December 2014 Board meeting, the Board approved the [SNFCI Action Plan](#), which was developed to further the objectives of SNFCI by more actively addressing forest and community issues at the Regional level as well as the watershed/county/National Forest level. The Board also instructed SNC staff to move forward with further development of a Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP), a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes, including the actions identified in the SNFCI Action Plan and expanding upon them to include a variety of other watershed health issues.

In response to this charge, SNC staff developed a draft [Plan](#) to guide development of the WIP, which was approved by the Board in March 2015. This Plan is being organized and coordinated by the SNC and the USFS, in close partnership with a growing group of additional federal, state, and local agencies, and diverse stakeholders. The USFS Region 5 leadership was fully engaged in developing this plan, and has indicated that all of the National Forests in the Sierra Nevada will be active participants

in the WIP. The USFS also co-hosted the March 4 Summit with the SNC, which is covered in more detail in the Policy and Outreach Report.

The WIP will enhance and build upon our ongoing efforts to restore Sierra forests to ecological health. By identifying and quantifying the need for, and cost of, restoration at the watershed level, as well as the impediments to taking such action, we will create a clearer roadmap for moving forward. Engaging other state and federal agencies who support restoration activities will ensure a more strategic and effective approach. The program will also provide critical information for policy makers and “downstream beneficiaries” to consider their role in this restoration effort. At the same time, building on existing collaborative efforts ensures that key interested parties are engaged in the assessment process and in project development and implementation and that ongoing efforts will be enhanced.

Current Status

Since the March launch of the WIP, SNC staff has been focused on developing both the internal structure and external partner relationships required to implement the WIP, and developing the template for approaching implementation of the WIP at the watershed level. Staff has been building on the momentum and interest generated at the March Summit with follow up conversations and meeting with our participants to identify opportunities to leverage our efforts to further our shared objectives under the WIP. The staff also continues to engage new partners in this effort, many of whom are approaching us asking for ways to support the WIP after participating in the Summit, or reading about it through one of the many news outlets that ran the story.

The USFS continues to be a critical partner, and we are currently finalizing an interagency agreement into which they’ve invested \$50,000 to support the WIP. In addition to this agreement, the SNC has also invested \$100,000 into an agreement with the Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC) Joint Powers Authority (JPA) to support the WIP at the watershed level. These critical partnerships and funding commitments are integral to moving the WIP forward in the next year. We have also developed an internal structure to support the WIP, which is being directed by Jim Branham, and coordinated by Mandy Vance. This structure includes the following four teams, comprised of various SNC staff:

- Policy Team (Team Leader: Angela Avery)
- Funding Team (Team Leader: Bob Kingman)
- Communications Team (Team Leader: Brittany Covich)
- Implementation Team (Interim Team Leader: Mandy Vance)

We will most likely identify a new leader for the Implementation Team and engage them through the SCRMC JPA agreement later this year as the watershed level WIP effort gains momentum. We are also working with the USFS and other key partners to identify their roles within this structure.

Here are some of the key outcomes of the last three months from each of our Teams:

Policy

- At our April meeting, the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council elected to move forward in partnership on the South Fork American River Large Landscape Demonstration Project on the Eldorado National Forest, which is in the early planning stages. This project will give us an opportunity to identify and explore real actions that may help us overcome major policy-related barriers to increasing the pace and scale of restoration on our forested lands.
- The SNC staff has reviewed our list of WIP Summit participants and have identified recommended follow strategies for each, including those who can play a critical role in policy issues as well as funding issues. This includes a meeting with California Air Resources Board and California Environmental Protection Agency to explore opportunities for increasing the use of fire as a restoration tool.
- The recent dramatic increase in bark beetle mortality in the Sierra Nevada has become a focal point of concern around forest health, particularly in the southern Sierra Nevada. A report published based on a flyover study conducted April 15-17, 2015, showed alarming results. In the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, pine mortality, mostly from western pine beetle, was common and severe almost everywhere at lower elevations. Estimated number of trees killed in these two forests together exceeded five million. Only about 300,000 trees were estimated killed last year in the same area. In response to this emerging issue, SNC staff is exploring potential opportunities to expand the applications of the Categorical Exemptions available to bark beetle infested areas under the Farm Bill in order to increase the pace and scale of restoration of these areas. This includes discussions with the USFS Region 5, CAL FIRE, and the California Natural Resources Agency.

Staff has also been participating in an advisory capacity in meetings with the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA), a group of urban and rural organizations dedicated to the restoration and improvement of California's watersheds and forests. The members of CAFWA include the Rural County Representatives of California, Association of California Water Agencies, California Forestry Association, California Farm Bureau, and The Nature Conservancy. Members are working together to seek new ways to promote proactive, science-based, and ecologically sound forest management practices that will reduce the risk of destructive megafires. In late March, CAFWA members took the opportunity to provide a statement for the record to the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands, identifying issues that currently exist on forest lands and providing a number of recommended actions that could address forest health concerns. That statement is provided as [Attachment A](#) to this report. In addition to the written statement, ACWA member and Placer County Water Agency representative, Andy Fecko, provided a statement in person.

Funding

- Staff has researched and compiled a comprehensive list of funding opportunities that align with the WIP. The information is available to SNC partners via website, newsletter, or by request, and will assist organizations in search of funds to plan and complete forest health and watershed restoration work.
- Limited technical assistance is also being provided to organizations preparing grant applications to a broad range of federal, state, and private grant-making entities.
- Staff is coordinating closely with other state agencies and funding sources that will be administering grant programs using Proposition 84 and Proposition 1 Bond funds, Green House Gas Reduction revenues, SRA Fire prevention fees, and transportation mitigation fees.
- Staff is closely tracking development of a Parks Bond which, if passed, could provide additional revenue to support protection of public investments in forested recreation areas.

Communications

- Staff has developed a new summary to expand the tools available to staff and partners for sharing information about the WIP. This summary has been provided as [Attachment B](#) to this report.
- The other primary updates for the communications activities supporting the WIP are captured in the Policy and Outreach Staff Report.

Implementation

- The SNC is coordinating with USFS Region 5 and the Tahoe National Forest, who is in the process of completing initial data analysis for the lands they manage in order to ground truth and refine the watershed assessment approach at the forest level. They will be presenting their assessment to SNC and USFS Region 5 staff at the end of May, which will help inform the best path forward for performing similar assessment on the USFS lands throughout the Region (a verbal update will be provided, assuming the assessment is completed by the time of this Board meeting).
- We anticipate that this analysis will include a brief written summary providing restoration needs by category (fuels, meadow, roads, etc.), their estimated costs and impediments to implementation, using these three phases:
 - Restoration projects that are NEPA ready/nearly ready in the forest
 - Already identified and additional restoration projects in existing five-year planning areas (both anticipated planning and implementation costs)
 - Restoration activities needed but not currently in line for project planning or implementation due to various types of constraints on the landscape, including but not limited to policy and fiscal constraints

- This preliminary assessment will provide the foundation upon which the SNC, USFS, and other critical partners will build a template for engaging other landowners, collaborative groups, and local stakeholders in developing a well-rounded assessment of the state of our watersheds and their restoration needs. SNC and Region 5 will be meeting to develop this approach following the Tahoe National Forest Assessment at the end of May. The Agreements described earlier in this report with SCRMC and the USFS will provide the primary resources required to develop and execute the specific tasks required to implement the watershed level analysis on a broader scale.

Next Steps

Staff will continue further development and implementation of the WIP, focusing efforts on the four key areas of Policy, Funding, Communications, and Implementation. Efforts continue to focus on the forest/fire/community issues, but we are moving towards the point of developing a more comprehensive approach to watershed health to ensure that aquatic, meadow, habitat, and recreational resources are protected and restored.

Staff will continue to follow up with our March WIP Summit participants to identify opportunities to leverage our efforts to further our shared objectives under the WIP, as well as continue to engage new partners in this effort.

The assessment of restoration needs of the USFS lands will serve as the starting point for a broader watershed assessment to address other lands and additional watershed issues. The SNC and USFS will work with other state, federal, and local agencies, and stakeholders in completing the necessary assessment of restoration needs. It is anticipated that this effort will begin in two or three watersheds and over time expand across the Region. The aggregation of these assessments and resulting action plans will form the WIP. The additional resources and staffing that will be available to us through our agreements with the SCRMC JPA and the UFS will greatly assist us in increasing our ability to advance the implementation of the WIP.

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 Boardmembers are encouraged to share their thoughts and comments.