

Agenda Item IX

Attachment B

The Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program

The Sierra Nevada Region provides more than 60% of California's developed water supply, but a four-year drought, a century of fire suppression, widespread tree mortality due to insect attacks and disease, and a changing climate have led to an increased risk of large, damaging wildfires.

The Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program will:

- Restore Sierra forests and watersheds to a healthier state
- Improve the quantity and quality of water throughout the year
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and stabilize carbon storage
- Improve local socio-economic conditions and public safety
- Improve habitat for wildlife, fish, and plant species
- Reduce the risk of large, damaging wildfires
- Preserve working landscapes
- Protect air quality

Wildfires in the Sierra Nevada are getting bigger and more intense. Extreme drought and record-low snowpack are leaving forests and meadows stressed, compromising the Region's ability to filter and store water for use later in the year. Greenhouse gasses are being released at a higher rate than previously expected due to drought and insect-related tree mortality, and high-intensity fire events. California needs a well-coordinated, comprehensive program that increases the pace and scale of restoration in the Sierra Nevada to address the conditions that currently exist.

The Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program

(WIP) is a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes. This effort is being organized and coordinated by the state's Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) and the federal United States Forest Service (USFS), in close partnership with other federal, state and local agencies, and diverse stakeholders.



Photos courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

The Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program will be implemented by federal, state, and local partners working together to analyze restoration needs at the watershed level, with the goal of matching funding and addressing policy barriers in order to complete projects that restore the Region to a healthier state.

There is growing consensus that more must be done to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration in the Sierra Nevada, but a number of policy-related barriers need to be addressed in order to restore our forests and watersheds to a healthier state.

- Controlled burns, under appropriate conditions, help to thin overgrown forests and reduce the risk of large, damaging fires. However, air quality regulations often restrict the available days that forest managers can conduct such burns.
- Policies related to federal funding for fire suppression often result in funds that would otherwise be available for restoration being “swept” to pay for suppression.
- Completion of environmental assessment processes under federal and state regulations can take a year or more, and can be costly. Developing projects on a larger landscape scale may provide greater efficiency in complying with regulations.
- The lack of wood and biomass processing infrastructure in the Sierra Nevada is a significant impediment to forest restoration efforts. Recent state policy efforts such as the Bioenergy Action Plan and SB 1122 (2012) provide direction on increasing the use of forest biomass for energy production. However, a number of challenges still remain.

Opportunities to establish more reliable funding sources for restoration in the Sierra exist, but coordination among federal, state, and local agencies, and private partners is necessary.

- California voters approved the \$7.5 billion water bond last year, with a significant amount of funding available for projects that restore California’s primary watershed. State agencies are coordinating efforts to maximize the impacts of Proposition 1, including efforts in the Sierra Nevada.
- Sierra Nevada forests are huge carbon reservoirs for the state, but high intensity wildfires are turning those storage pools into emissions sources. Identifying opportunities to increase investment in the Sierra Nevada Region through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund will be critical as California works to meet greenhouse gas emission reduction goals.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency that carries out a mission of protecting the environment and economy in a complementary fashion across 25 million acres, one-quarter of the state. To learn more, please visit the Sierra Nevada Conservancy Web site.



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