

Background

Over the past 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.

As a part of SNFCI, the SNFCI Regional 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. Boardmember Bob Kirkwood serves as the Board Liaison to the Coordinating Council. 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 U.S. 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. During this period, the USFS has been 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.

Also at the December 2014 Board meeting, the Board 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. This Program will include the actions identified in the SNFCI Action Plan and expand upon them to include a variety of other watershed health issues.

Current Status

Attached to this Staff Report is a draft plan ([Attachment A](#)) to guide development of the WIP. Staff is recommending Board approval of this plan in order for development of the

WIP to move forward. This comprehensive effort is organized and coordinated by the SNC and the USFS, in close partnership with additional federal, state, and local agencies, and diverse stakeholders. The USFS Region 5 leadership has been 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 co-hosted the March 4 Summit with the SNC.

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.

Next Steps

Upon approval by the Governing Board, SNC staff will continue further development and implementation of the WIP. Initially the WIP will use the SNFCI Action Plan as its centerpiece. While the SNFCI efforts will continue to focus on the forest/fire/community issues, there is a need to develop a more comprehensive approach to watershed health to ensure that aquatic, meadow, habitat and recreational resources are protected and restored. The success of the Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program, upon which the Sierra Nevada WIP is loosely modeled, has shown that a well-articulated program with clear objectives and specific projects can be very successful in drawing investment and support.

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 SNC is coordinating with USFS Region 5 and the Tahoe National Forest in refining and “ground truthing” the assessment approach. The Tahoe National Forest is in the process of completing initial data analysis for the lands they manage, which will help inform the best path forward for USFS lands throughout the Region. The WIP builds upon the significant consensus that more must be done to restore Sierra Nevada forests and watersheds. The SNC and the USFS are organizing a multi-state/federal/local

agency effort to work with Regional stakeholders, as well as those outside the Region who are impacted by watershed degradation, to develop and implement the WIP.

SNC staff will use the State of the Sierra Nevada's Forests Report as a companion piece to our SNFCI Action Plan and in development of the WIP. This report will be updated from time to time to add new information or address emerging issues.

Staff will provide regular updates to the Board as to progress in the development and implementation of the WIP.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Board approve the plan to guide the development of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program and authorize staff to take the necessary actions to develop and implement it.