

Background

For more than six years, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) has been actively involved in forest and community health issues. 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 wellbeing.

As a part of SNFCI's ongoing work, the SNFCI Regional Coordinating Council (Coordinating Council) continues to represent a wide range of diverse perspectives unified by the common goals of increasing the pace and scale of restoration of the Sierra Nevada's forests and building healthier ecosystems, economies, and communities in the Sierra Nevada. Various forest collaboratives also continue their work to carry out this same mission on the ground in specific watersheds and communities.

In June 2014, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures the issues being addressed under SNFCI were the organization's top priority, which resulted in the [State of Sierra Nevada's Forests Report](#), which represents the current understanding of forest conditions and potential consequences. Recognizing that a more holistic approach to watershed health in the Sierra was needed, SNC staff worked closely with U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Region 5 in the development and subsequent launch of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) on March 4, 2015. The WIP is a coordinated, integrated, collaborative program to restore the health of California's primary watershed through increased investment and needed policy changes. The USFS is actively engaged in all aspects of the WIP, including general coordination, communications, funding development, policy, and project identification and implementation. In July 2015, SNC staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 met with Secretary John Laird and California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) staff, resulting in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that commits the CNRA and USFS Region 5 to a cooperative state/federal collaboration to support the WIP. The SNC is designated as the lead state agency for coordination and implementation of the WIP.

In late June 2015, staff worked with the USFS and CNRA to have a portion of the Sierra Nevada Region included in [the designation of the California Headwaters as a Resilient Lands and Waters Region \(CA Headwaters\)](#). While this designation doesn't result in new funding for the Region, it does shine a light on the importance of the Sierra to California, and supports the work SNC and its partners are striving to accomplish through the WIP. SNC is currently in close collaboration with USFS in the development of communications materials and establishment of a working group in support of the CA Headwaters initiative.

Boardmembers Bob Kirkwood and Pam Giacomini continue to serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the WIP effort.

Current Status

WIP Regional Strategy

After a rich public comment period, and additional feedback from our agency partners, the WIP Regional Strategy has been finalized and posted to the WIP website, www.restorethesierra.org. Responses to commenters have been sent out capturing how comments were addressed. This is a dynamic document and we will continue to engage other key partners to ensure their expertise has a home in the WIP. Our partners from the Communications Team at USFS Region 5 are working with SNC staff to develop a more engaging visual representation of the WIP and the Regional Strategy in the form of a video animation project. This project should be completed and posted to the website sometime in mid-September, and will be available for a range of other opportunities to promote better understanding of and engagement in the WIP.

WIP Pilot Watersheds

Working closely with Boardmembers Bob Kirkwood and Pam Giacomini, SNC staff has continued to further refine the concept of WIP Pilot Watersheds. These pilots will be designed to explore new ways of doing the business of watershed restoration at an appropriate pace and scale. They will focus on developing new tools and/or expanding the use of existing tools to address governance, investment, planning, and implementation aspects of restoration efforts. These are not pilots in the traditional sense of the word. Many pilot projects already exist that focus on the testing of specific, on-the-ground restoration practices. There are also numerous large landscape pilots, in which the focus is on expanding the scale of restoration work beyond traditional boundaries.

The scale of WIP watershed pilots may not be uniform or limited to a particular watershed level. They may encompass a sub-watershed, watershed, or ecoregion, depending on the concept that is being tested and the conditions and opportunities available in a particular area. Staff is continuing to work with Boardmembers Kirkwood and Giacomini to finalize a pilot description that will guide the selection of these areas. The process will be largely opportunistic based on a number of factors, rather than a "call for proposal" approach.

The SNC continues to research and identify various governance models, underutilized tools, and financing that could most effectively be put on the ground and tested in pilot watersheds. SNC is also researching opportunities available within the infrastructure, products, and markets issues the Region is facing in the arena of wood and biomass processing.

Metrics

A wide range of suggestions for WIP metrics were provided during the WIP Regional Strategy public comment period, indicating both the importance and complexity of WIP metrics selection. SNC has determined that initially, the task before us is to identify a set of metrics that are already being collected by WIP partners on a regular basis that support the key values identified in the WIP Regional Strategy. A workgroup comprised of SNC staff and SNFCI Regional Council members has taken on the task of developing

this initial set of metrics, with an eye on future opportunities to explore deeper questions and data gaps as the WIP gains momentum and capacity through the engagement and commitment of new partners. The SNC's previous work on Regional indicators will be considered, as will other complementary efforts that are identifying metrics, such as the Forest Climate Action Team.

Sierra Cascade Dialog Group WIP Session

Established in November 2010 by USFS Region 5, the Sierra Cascade Dialog (Dialog) has been a series of conversations among engaged stakeholders on a range of issues across the Sierra Nevada and the Cascades, with a specific focus on the national forests in these regions. The goal of the Dialog is to create shared understanding among participants with diverse opinions, and to provide an opportunity for learning, shared meaning, aligned actions, mutual respect, and understanding different perspectives. As the co-founder of the WIP, USFS Region 5 has indicated that they see great benefit in utilizing the Dialog as both a vehicle for developing stronger partner engagement in the WIP, as well stronger alignment between the WIP and related USFS planning tools and processes. One such process is forest plan revision, which has been a focus of the Dialog for the past several years. The first WIP-focused Dialog is anticipated in early 2017, with the potential for subsequent meetings to follow.

Communications

In late May, staff participated in an event held to celebrate the signing of a Master Stewardship Agreement between the U.S. Forest Service and the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority. The Agreement will assist in advancing restoration and conservation in the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed, and provides a model for other restoration efforts in the Sierra Nevada Region. The communications team captured interviews at the event and developed a short video to highlight the important effort. The video was shared on SNC's Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube platforms in early July, and was shared with members of the Amador Calaveras Consensus Group and the Upper Mokelumne River Watershed Authority. The U.S. Forest Service also shared the video with their 11 forests in the Sierra Nevada Region.

In June, staff helped organize a tour for science and policy staff from a variety of agencies at the Teakettle Experimental Forest. CalEPA, the U.S. Forest Service, CAL FIRE, CA Air Resources Board, and the CA Conservation Corps were all present. Our hosts, Matthew Hurteau, Malcolm North, and Mark Meyer, introduced participants to their research on forest treatments and carbon sequestration, and also touched on greenhouse gas emissions following wildfire. They have been tracking 25,000 trees on site for the last 20 years and according to their research, thinning and prescribed burning activities can help to maintain carbon stability because they reduce competition for the larger trees, which both absorb and store more carbon than the small trees and have a greater chance of surviving wildfire. Big trees are also good from a habitat perspective. Mark Meyer has been studying flying squirrels at Teakettle, and noted that they prefer the same large trees that also store the most carbon.



Staff had been working on logistics for a second summer tour in partnership with the Placer County Water Agency in the American River Watershed. However, the Trailhead Fire outside of Foresthill forced us to postpone the tour to late September. Staff will now be working to promote the tour as part of Sierra Nevada Watershed Protection Week, and will focus on getting key decision makers out on the ground to discuss the connection between healthy forests and a reliable water supply.

WIP Watershed Rapid Assessments

The USFS is developing a report on the findings of their initial WIP Assessment, which is a summary of Region 5's restoration needs in a variety of areas, including but not limited to vegetation treatments, meadow restoration, aquatic organism passage, road restoration, and abandoned mine restoration. This summary is drawn from the data the individual forests in Region 5 had already input into a GIS project database, and has some limitations, including different timescales depending on the forest (2-5 years), and varying levels of accuracy depending on each forest's engagement with this database. The USFS is checking the accuracy of the data from the report with individual forests. They are utilizing this opportunity to get more consistent contributions to the database, as well as encouraging forests to think and plan in a more long-term way about restoration needs. SNC anticipates receiving this final report, including a written description and tables of each forest's projects, soon. While this initial report won't yield the full range of needs and constraints the WIP had originally hoped to identify, it will provide a more complete picture of already identified USFS Region 5 restoration needs in one easily accessed place than existed before. Another outcome of the USFS WIP assessments is a GIS database query tool that can easily provide updated restoration needs on an ongoing basis, which will hopefully yield more comprehensive information over time.

SNC staff is working with the National Park Service (NPS) to identify a path forward for completion of their WIP assessments. This year marks their 100th anniversary, and they are well into the recreation season at this point, so staff time is at a premium. SNC staff has identified a way to move forward with NPS assessments that use data they have, plus some SNC staff mapping support, that will result in mutual benefit for parties. This work has begun with the Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, and next will be Yosemite. The anticipated completion date for this work was late August.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) completed their first “template” assessment on the Mokelumne watershed last month. They don’t expect to be able to do all areas by the end of the summer, but SNC staff has helped them to prioritize specific regions of the Sierra for first, second, and third “rounds” of assessment work. It may be that the BLM analysis extends into fall; SNC staff expects to continue working with them through completion.

WIP partners at the Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC) have completed roughly two thirds of their WIP rapid assessments, which includes general information as to identified issues, restoration needs, plans, and organized efforts that exist in each WIP Watershed Assessment Area. The final third are anticipated for completion by the end of September.

Funding

SNC staff continues to meet with other funding agencies to promote projects in the Region and explore leveraging opportunities. Staff has organized and promoted numerous grant-writing workshops throughout the Region. These workshops have been focused on building the capacity of local partners to search for, apply for, and administer grants.

Staff has also been engaged in discussions to ensure that the SNC and the Region are included in future bond measures, cap and trade auction revenue, or other revenue generating mechanisms.

In July, SNC hosted and facilitated a meeting between SNFCI Regional Council members, other WIP stakeholders, and leaders from the Governor’s Forest Climate Action Team (FCAT). The purpose of the meeting was to provide feedback on the draft Forest Carbon Plan, which the FCAT is developing to provide forest carbon targets and an array of strategies to promote healthy forests that protect and enhance forest carbon and the broader range of forest environmental services for all forests in California. Close collaboration with this team may eventually result in the allocation of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds (GGRF) to watershed restoration in the Sierra Nevada Region.

GIS Tools

The SNC GIS team has developed online mapping tools to support the WIP, including a tool that assists in the planning for WIP pilot watersheds, and a WIP external investment tracker that includes a variety of data that answers questions about natural resource conditions and project needs. As the WIP continues to grow, these tools and data can be evolved and expanded to tell the story of the WIP, and assist in decision making on how to best restore and protect Sierra Nevada watersheds. These tools will also serve as critical components of the WIP hub. A demonstration of some of the information will be presented at this Board meeting.

Next Steps

Staff will work with the USFS and other partners to implement the WIP Regional Strategy, utilizing the new animated video version to increase understanding and commitment. Staff will also work with our SNFCI Metrics Workgroup in order to further refine the initial set of high-level, Regional metrics with which the effectiveness of the WIP will be gauged over time.

Once WIP Watershed Rapid Assessments are complete, SNC, USFS, and other WIP partners will start reviewing and ground-truthing the findings, followed by an analysis to determine the dominant storylines that emerge about the conditions, restoration needs, and opportunities in these Watershed Assessment Areas. SNC anticipates beginning to engage an initial set of local level WIP partners in discussions about the findings and opportunities offered by these assessments, as well as opportunities to engage in the implementation of the WIP at the watershed level, in the late fall or winter of 2016.

The SNC staff and WIP partners are also in discussions regarding the development of a stronger framework to engage our partners more actively in the WIP, including the formation of a WIP Steering Committee (public agencies) and/or WIP Advisory group (stakeholders), building as much as possible off existing groups and partnerships.

The SNC staff will continue to push towards the identification of at least two pilot watersheds for implementing these new restoration models on the ground, with the goal of replicating successful efforts across the landscape. Staff will also identify other efforts from which lessons can be learned and consider how to best translate for a broader application.

The SNC staff will continue to work in a variety of active roles in several task forces and teams to move WIP objectives forward, including, but not limited to, the Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force, Forest Climate Action Team, and the Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding.

Staff and partners will continue to cement existing and cultivate new WIP partnerships by growing the list of WIP supporters and gathering information regarding their specific geographic and issue areas of most interest. The Sierra Cascade Dialog Group session in early 2017 will be an excellent tool for broadening our WIP partners and deepening their understanding of the program. Staff will also further its work in the four key areas of Policy, Funding, Communications, and Restoration Implementation. 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.