

### **Background**

The North Central Subregion of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) includes all of Plumas and Sierra Counties and the eastern portions of Butte and Tehama Counties down to the base of the Sierra foothills. The Subregion is served by the Mt. Lassen Area staff from both the Auburn office and the Susanville office.

The majority of land (58 percent) in the Subregion is in public ownership, primarily under U.S. Forest Service (USFS) management within three National Forests: Plumas National Forest, and portions of Tahoe and Lassen National Forests. Large amounts of private lands are under ownership or management by forest products companies. Sierra Valley, bridging Sierra and Plumas Counties at 5,000' elevation on the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada, is the largest alpine valley in California, comprised of private ranches devoted to cattle and haying agriculture. There is also significant private ranching in the western foothills of Tehama and Butte Counties.

Aside from timber and ranching, the resource backbone that ties most of the Subregion together is the Feather River, which is the largest contributing watershed feeding the State Water Project, and also a significant source of hydroelectric power for the state. There are other important watersheds in the Subregion as well, including the Yuba River in Sierra County, Big Chico Creek in Butte County, and several drainages including Deer Creek and Mill Creek in Tehama County. Lake Almanor resides in the north of Plumas County.

Most of the Subregion is rural alpine or foothill terrain with scattered small communities. The population of the North Central Subregion within the SNC boundary is 88,750.

This population is not distributed uniformly. Plumas and Sierra Counties have a combined population of about 23,250, while the SNC portion of Tehama County consists only of 1,933 people. In contrast, eastern Butte County has substantial population concentration totaling 63,570, largely in Paradise, Magalia, and around Lake Oroville.

### **Current Status**

There has been one round of grant awards (March 2011) since the last North Central Subregion Report, with this Subregion receiving 5 grants totaling \$1,760,000 out of \$10 million awarded across the Region. Two of these grants (totaling \$1,540,000) were for conservation acquisitions in Sierra County, two grants were for pre-acquisition activities in Butte and Tehama Counties, and one was for preservation of a site containing warm springs in Plumas County. This brings the total of SNC grants to date for the North Central Subregion to 41, totaling \$11,266,119. Nearly \$9 million of this went towards land acquisition (conservation easements or fee title purchase by conservation organizations) in Sierra and Plumas Counties.

### Fuels and Fire Management

Reducing overstocked fuels to prevent the devastating impacts of catastrophic fires continues to be one of the greatest landscape challenges throughout the Subregion. There are numerous impediments to complete fire safety projects including the reduction of available funding to support Fire Safe Councils, and the closure and loss of lumber mills and local biomass electrical generation capability. The Loyaltan biomass energy facility in Sierra County has been shut down again for the past year, and its future is uncertain (although recent developments are more promising).

SNC is supporting multi-prong strategies in every county to reduce fuel loading, create watershed-scale fuel breaks, tackle the challenges of economic biomass utilization, and assist with defensible space. These activities include the Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI), a major SNC initiative to work with the Forest Service and other private and public stakeholders in collaborative efforts to reduce fuels, improve forest health, promote biomass utilization, and sustain local jobs.

Efforts to improve forest health and fuel loading, and reduce fire risk, are the focus of the current round of grant funding. Grant applications were received in January and are currently being evaluated.

### Working Landscapes

Working landscapes are vital to the economic, cultural, and environmental health of the Subregion. A variety of public and private tools and efforts are utilized to protect this asset and help ensure its economic viability. The Williamson Act has been a vital tool to this end. About 109,000 acres are under Williamson Act contracts in Plumas and Sierra Counties. There are also thousands of acres enrolled in the western foothills, primarily in Tehama County. (Most of the 288,000 acres under contract in Tehama and Butte Counties are in the Central Valley outside of the SNC Region.)

State subvention funding to the counties to offset lost tax revenues related to Williamson Act enrollment was discontinued in 2009, exacerbating challenging situations for counties trying to balance their continued protection of working landscapes with the loss of county revenues. A bill to preserve the program was signed by the governor in mid-2011, but that changed the operation of the program substantially. In lieu of reinstating transfer of state tax money to counties, individual contracts could be altered so that farmers would lose 10 percent of their tax savings. The increased taxes would flow directly to county governments. While the reconfigured program falls far short of providing the revenue support that county governments relied upon before, the program was essentially frozen, it was a positive acknowledgment of state policy makers as to the value of the program. Counties are still trying to sort how to react to these changes.

Conservation easements have been utilized in this Subregion as a tool to complement Williamson Act tax reductions to preserve working landscapes as well as watershed values.

Recreation and Tourism

The SNC has worked with the Sierra Business Council and National Geographic to continue development of the Geotourism MapGuide Project that has now extended to the entire Sierra Nevada. In 2011, hundreds of nominations were evaluated and added to the northern Sierra, which encompasses much of the North Central Subregion. A separate report on Geotourism is being presented to the Board.

Next Steps

The Healthy Forests grant awards will push forward SNC efforts to support the North Central Subregion priorities in forest health and wildfire risk reduction. Additionally, SNC will continue efforts through SNFCI to aid in the development of collaborative forest efforts. SNC staff will continue to monitor local issues, attend stakeholder meetings, and develop strategies to better assist local efforts to improve the economic and environmental conditions of the Subregion.

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.**