

Background

Over the past few years, Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) staff has had numerous discussions with a wide range of partners and stakeholders on how best to address issues related to forest health, wildfire and sustainable communities. It has been clear that the relationship between these issues present a unique opportunity for the SNC to assist the Region in addressing these matters in an integrated manner, affecting a number of our program areas.

At the March Board meeting the SNC's Governing Board reviewed a draft description of a proposed Initiative and Resolution and directed staff to solicit public comment, make appropriate changes, and bring the matter back to the Board at the June meeting. In addition to ongoing conversations with a variety of stakeholders, during the month of April the SNC received 63 comments addressing the initiative and resolution. At their June meeting, the Board unanimously approved the Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Resolution. The Resolution was modified considerably based on public comment and had support from a wide array of organizations and individuals.

Through the Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative (SNFCI), the SNC is fostering collaboration locally and Regionally in an effort to support a cohesive, economically viable, and sustainable approach to reducing fire risk, creating jobs, and protecting our valuable forest and watershed resources. SNFCI has strong coordination with federal agencies, particularly the US Forest Service, as they manage a significant portion of the land in the Sierra Nevada Region, and the SNFCI compliments their parallel efforts to manage the forest landscape in a more holistic manner with ecological restoration as the focus and collaborating with the local communities. Staff is also working very closely with Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service to identify common goals and ways to formally involve the agencies in the Initiative.

Based on discussions with key stakeholders and feedback from local forest collaboratives, the SNC is working to form a Regional coordinating council to work on the statewide and national issues that will impact the success of these efforts. A SNFCI Coordinating Council is being created consisting of local governments, tribal entities, representatives from the environmental/conservation community, the wood products industry, fire safe councils and other key parties. The Council will work closely with appropriate federal and state agencies to ensure a coordinated approach. The primary focus of the council is policy, investment, emerging technology, and science and research. The first charge of the Council will be the creation of an implementation plan. The Plan will establish measurable outcomes for the Initiative and identify a process for monitoring success. By identifying needs and opportunities, the Plan will assist in strategic investment in the Region.

Boardmember Nunes and former Board Vice-Chair Wilensky have agreed to co-chair the Coordinating Council and Boardmember

Kirkwood will serve with Nunes as the Board liaisons to the initiative. Staff is currently working with these individuals to identify membership of the Council to ensure that the necessary parties are represented in order for the effort to be successful.

One critical SNFCI element is SNC support for local efforts aimed at convening diverse stakeholders to identify common visions and strategies that result in ecologically healthy forests, fire-safe communities, local job creation, and retaining existing industrial and commercial infrastructure and fostering new infrastructure as needed. On-the-ground manifestations of the SNFCI include local collaborative groups such as the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group (ACCG) and the Sustainable Forests and Communities Collaborative (SFCC), and groups formed to address more specific projects such as fuels reduction project design. Some of these groups are largely supported by SNC staff in terms of meeting logistics, facilitation, and development efforts.

Current Status

SNC staff is in the process of garnering formal endorsements from stakeholders throughout the Sierra through proactive presentations and outreach. Since June, SNC staff has provided almost twenty presentations to a variety of groups, including County Boards of Supervisors, Integrated Regional Water Management Plan Groups, and Resource Conservation Districts, and an additional ten additional presentations have been scheduled in the next few weeks. Numerous other conversations are being with stakeholders to solicit endorsements. At this early point in outreach efforts, a total of forty organizations, agencies and individuals have signed on to endorse the resolution. This group includes six counties, as well as key stakeholders such as Sierra Forest Legacy, California Forestry Association, Sierra Forest Products and Sierra Business Council. In addition, a specific outreach plan has been developed for tribes that integrate the efforts of several key partners in tribal communication in the Sierra Nevada. An interactive webpage has also been developed allowing partners to easily endorse the resolution.

To begin developing a Regional strategy that can help ensure a balance of appropriately scaled lumber mills, biomass to energy facilities and small wood manufacturing, staff is assessing the available supply of woody biomass and developing an inventory of existing facilities and their volume capacities. This will help target SNFCI efforts toward areas of greatest need. Staff continues to network with established groups with common goals to involve them in the initiative and evaluate specific support SNC may be able to offer them.

Through the efforts of a development consultant hired by SNC to support the local collaboratives, a USDA Rural Development grant has been awarded to promote the establishment of small biomass processing businesses in targeted low-income areas of the Sierra Nevada Region, creating a diverse and stable market for the utilization of woody biomass which will create jobs, stimulate rural economies in low-income areas, and increase the economic feasibility of sustainable fuels reduction efforts which are needed for fire safety and forest health. In addition, two local collaboratives have each

been awarded grants from the National Forest Foundation to provide capacity building support to sustain the organizations for the long term.

Next Steps

Staff will continue working with Co-chairs Wilensky and Nunes and Boardmember Kirkwood to assemble and launch the Regional coordinating council, which will establish short and long-term goals as well as draft an implementation plan with measureable outcomes. Staff will also continue to upgrade the SNFCI webpage with more photos, graphics and general information, and print our SNFCI brochure and other relevant informational materials.

Staff will identify ways to best engage federal land management agencies with SNFCI, recognizing that these agencies are ultimately responsible for management decisions on these public lands. USFS, BLM and NPS have assigned liaisons to the effort who will be interacting at the Regional level. The appropriate agencies are active in the local collaboratives as well.

Each SNC area staff member will be actively involved in the SNFCI outreach effort, providing presentations to groups, with a goal of adding all interested stakeholder as signatories to the SNFCI resolution. As appropriate, additional resources will be focused on such items as support for market analysis/biomass utilization, business plan development and support for the coordinating council. Additional opportunities will be actively sought to submit applications for funding to support both local and regional SNFCI activities.

Through logistical support, facilitation and general guidance, SNC staff will continue to encourage local collaboratives to move continually towards on the ground projects with quantifiable results. Staff will also look for additional opportunities to support local efforts in new areas of the Sierra Nevada.

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.