

Conservancy looks at forest, watershed health

By Trevor Warner , Paradise Post

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Overseeing about 25 million acres of land, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy has a lot of ground to cover. On Wednesday and Thursday, the conservancy brought its quarterly board meeting to Paradise.

Spokeswoman Brittany Covich said the Paradise region faces the same issues that other regions of the conservancy face - defending against wildfires and protecting the watershed.

The two are closely linked, she said.

When shrubs and trees die in a severe fire it causes the roots to decay, she said.

“Ultimately, it’s the roots that hold the soil to the slope,” she said. “When vegetation decays the slope is no longer stabilized and there’s a higher risk of soil getting washed off the hillside and into the water supply.”

Sediment washing into a lake will build from the bottom up and begin to affect how much water can be stored, she said.

The state’s drought conditions make the problem that much worse because the forests are “overgrown and tinder dry,” she said. To that end, forest restoration means watershed restoration, she said.

“We know that improving the health of the forest also improves the watershed,” she said.

The conservancy has partnered with the United States Forest Service and other stakeholders to begin a watershed improvement program that not only aims to maintain healthy forests and soil, but reduce air pollution that comes from the smoke of a large-scale fire.

Wednesday the group met in Paradise and took a tour of Paradise Lake and the Magalia Fire Center. Thursday they met at the Elks Lodge to further flesh out solutions.

They went over the conservancy’s three-year strategic plan which focuses on the watershed, grant funding, abating abandoned mines and fostering tourism.

Public members who want to comment on the strategic plan can do so online at sierranevada.ca.gov through Sept. 11.

Moving forward, the conservancy hopes to address policies that restrict prescribed burning, which is essentially using controlled fire to burn off excess forest fuel to prevent large-scale wildfires.

“It’s good to look at those policies to see if we can get a little more flexibility so we can use it as a natural fire fighting tool,” she said.

She said regulations limit the conditions, giving land management agencies only a small window of opportunity to use prescribed fire as a prevention tool.

She said the conservancy has a strong partnership with the Butte County Fire Safe Council, and it is the local partnerships in general that will help the conservancy accomplish its goals.

And while the conservancy will focus its efforts on larger issues like policies, funding and planning, the public can help on a local level by being mindful of their surroundings.

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“The public living in forested communities can help if they clear their defensible space and protect forest around their homes,” she said.

The next meeting will be in Tuolumne County on Dec. 2 and 3.

Reach the author at twarner@paradisepost.com .

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