

## U.S. Forest Service Pushes for Ecological Restoration

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*Vallejo, CA...– California's landscapes are under siege from a host of threats. Catastrophic wildfire, climate change, invasive species and increasing human population put these delicate ecosystems at risk. The U.S. Forest Service has recognized and battled these threats for decades, but recently the agency recognized the need for a more focused approach on Ecological Restoration as the primary goal for all land management actions....*

The goal is to retain and restore ecological resilience of the National Forest lands to achieve sustainable ecosystems that provide a broad range of services and value. Ecologically healthy and resilient landscapes, rich in biodiversity, have greater capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of natural disturbances and large scale threats.

The Forest Service recognizes that it cannot achieve its goals alone.

"The emphasis will be placed on expanding and developing partnerships to increase organizational capacity and the use of large-scale stewardship contracts operating at the landscape level to achieve restoration goals," said Randy Moore, Pacific Southwest Regional Forester.

In Central California, the Sierra, Sequoia and Stanislaus National Forests have been working hard on various Ecological Restoration projects.

The Dinkey Landscape Restoration Project covers 154,000 acres of the Sierra National Forest and private land in the Sierra Nevada Mountains east of Fresno. Restoration treatments are being implemented over a 10-year span and consist of mechanical and manual thinning, prescribed fire, meadow restoration, road improvement and eradication of invasive species. Outcomes will include improvements in wildfire



resilience, public and fire fighter safety, sensitive species habitat, watershed function and economic sustainability. The core collaborative group has approximately 30 individuals representing a range of public interests and includes private industry, Native American tribes, community organizations and government agencies.

"Collaboratives in general are going to help us manage the forest better in the future and it's what the public wants," said Scott Armentrout, Sierra National Forest Supervisor.

"We're bringing together a whole series of different stakeholders, different interested parties and with that group of people we're looking at 10 years worth of restoration projects in a particular spot in the forest where a lot of different interests meet and where management historically has been somewhat complex and somewhat contentious," said Mose Jones-Yellin, Deputy District Ranger, High Sierra District, Sierra National Forest.

Another ecological restoration project on the Sierra National Forest is the Coarsegold Resource Conservation District (CGRCD) which developed a planning grant through the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) Grant Program (Proposition 84) for watershed restoration work in the Willow Creek watershed. The planning grant was for \$60,764.00 with matching funds of \$24,602.25 (approximately \$48,000.00 of the \$60,764.00 was to be budgeted to the Forest Service for data gathering and NEPA/CEQA analysis).

"I believe this may be the first time state and local water agencies and the U.S. Forest Service have partnered for watershed improvements on the National Forest, both recognizing the mutual benefit, said Ranger Dave Martin, Bass Lake Ranger District, Sierra National Forest.

The Sierra National Forest will receive \$1.5 million over the next three to four years for fuel hazard reduction work. Outcomes of the treatments include: improvements in wildfire resilience, public and fire fighter safety, sensitive species habitat, watershed function and economic sustainability.

On the Sequoia National Forest, an example of Ecological Restoration was the management of the Lion Fire. On July 8, lightning started a fire in the Golden Trout Wilderness. The high snowpack and cool temperatures of spring and early summer provided a rare opportunity to manage the fire for resource benefits rather than suppress it. Under the right conditions, land managers use fire to restore resilience to ecosystems, improve wildlife habitat and prevent heavy accumulations of flammable fuels, while actively protecting lives, property and resources. The long-term environmental benefits of the Lion Fire are restoration of approximately 22,000 acres of the wilderness ecosystem, where fire can play its natural role in the future.

Also on the Sequoia National Forest, the Alta Sierra Fuels Reduction projects have begun in the Greenhorn Mountains of Kern County surrounding the community of Alta Sierra. The forest has high amounts of hazardous fuels and represents a hazard to the community. Fuel reduction activities will benefit health and safety by reducing the risk of a catastrophic fire and restoring ecosystems. Forest

Service crews have been working in the area for the past several months preparing fire lines and cutting ladder fuels to prepare for burning this fall. Included in the plan are pile burning and understory burning designed to consume surface fuels but not the forest canopy. The projects are coordinated between the Forest Service, Kern County Fire Department and the Kern River Valley Fire Safe Council. This is phase one of a five year project for 4,000 acres. The Forest Service expects to burn 1,500 acres this year in small units designed to minimize effects of smoke on the community while reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfires.

Finally, the Stanislaus National Forest is engaged in restoring an open pit (Juniper) uranium mine at a high elevation area near the Emigrant Wilderness. "We are very pleased that this restoration project is moving forward using advanced engineering techniques that will help us monitor natural radiation levels in the future," said Forest Supervisor Susan Skalski.

Contractors have been racing to beat the weather clock to complete phase one work to build an underground drainage system that will direct water from a natural spring to a sediment catch basin. Activities will shut down this year when snow conditions create unmanageable working conditions at this 8,500 foot site. Phase two work will begin next summer when crews will return to fill in the mine with the natural soils extracted in the '50s and '60s and placed in three piles surrounding the pit. Re-landscaping with natural vegetation will add the finishing touch with monitoring continuing into the future.

"Ecological Restoration crosses land boundaries and includes many different projects," said Moore. "Ultimately we want to create landscapes that survive and thrive in a changing environment and provide goods, services and recreation opportunities now and for generations to come."