

Background

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

We received letters from over 20 entities during the WIP Regional Strategy public comment period, and were pleased by both the thoughtful depth of the feedback as well as the diversity of those who provided it. The group included but wasn't limited to numerous water agencies, land conservancies, watershed restoration groups, restoration collaborative groups, and private citizens. The comments received included not only constructive criticism, but also much appreciation and support for the WIP. For instance, California Trout (CalTrout) offered the following statement of support:

[The] collective leadership [of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and USFS Region 5] in developing a comprehensive, region-wide approach to addressing imminent needs of such an important geography of California is timely, critical and thoughtful. Those involved with supporting restoration of the Sierra Nevada are well aware of what's at risk, not just to flora, fauna and supporting ecosystems, but also to local communities and downstream users of what is so critical to all, water. If we, together, do not aggressively increase pace and scale of restoration efforts there will be dire consequences to California as a whole. The Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) is central to realizing increased pace and scale of Sierra Nevada ecosystem Restoration and CalTrout offers it support in doing so. We look forward to being an active partner of the WIP.

These comments have added depth and dimension to the Regional Strategy where needed, and highlighted areas which needed clarity. The final draft of the WIP Regional Strategy will be posted at the WIP website, www.restorethesierra.org, in late June. Responses to commenters will be sent out capturing how comments were used, and we will continue to work with other key partners to ensure their expertise has a home in the WIP, wherever it lies in the realm of watershed health.

WIP Pilots

The SNC staff has continued to further develop the concept of WIP Pilots, and the SNC has hired contractor Mark Rentz, from Integrated Natural Resources Management, to identify various elements we could most effectively put on the ground and test in pilot areas, including various governance models, underutilized tools, and financing. He is also researching opportunities available to us within the infrastructure, products, and markets issues we're facing in the arena of wood and biomass processing.

The Regional Strategy also put the idea of WIP pilots on our partners' radar. Several interested parties have contacted us, and there are numerous areas in the Sierra Nevada Region that may be ripe for exploration for pilots. The SNC staff, with the support of Mark Rentz, is currently at work developing criteria that will help guide us in choosing locations.

Communications

In support of the WIP Summit, staff worked with the U.S. Forest Service to secure an [interview on Capital Public Radio's Insight Program](#). Jim Branham spoke for SNC, and Don Yasuda spoke representing the U.S. Forest Service. The interview focused on the need for the WIP, and the Program's efforts to date.

Staff have also been working to boost the profile of the WIP by connecting with other outreach campaigns. For example, staff developed a [short voice-over video](#) about the Sierra and the WIP for the [International Day of Forests](#) campaign, coordinated by the Food & Agriculture Organization.

Staff continues to update the WIP co-branded web page, www.restorethesierra.org. Most recent updates include: A feature [op-ed on the WIP](#) by Boardmember Kirkwood that was published in the San Jose Mercury News, a recording of the [March Summit keynote presentation](#) by Matthew Hurteau, and a [list of state plans](#) relevant to the WIP that are currently available for public comment.

WIP Watershed Rapid Assessments

Our federal partners, including USFS, BLM, and the National Park Service, continue to develop WIP Watershed Rapid Assessments on their lands, and the Sierra Collaborative Resources Management Council (SCRMC) has launched their high-level, rapid assessments across the sixteen WIP Watershed Assessment Areas. We anticipate the completion of the bulk of these assessments by mid-summer 2016.

National Disaster Resilience Competition (NDRC)

Since announcement of this award, staff has been participating in a series of meetings and training sessions focused on strong ongoing coordination among all involved agencies and organizations, as well as ensuring full compliance with the HUD financial and reporting requirements under the Grant. More information about this exciting opportunity can be found under [Agenda Item VI d, NDRC HUD Grant Update](#).

Engagement of Tribes in the WIP

The development of the Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) is providing an opportunity for the SNC and Tribes to talk about the Region: resources, areas of common interest, forest management practices, and water. To initiate discussions with tribes over the WIP and the Region's current and future conditions, SNC staff is planning a series of meetings, Tribal Forums, coinciding with the SNC Board meetings. The first of these happened on June 2, the day before this SNC Board meeting. More information about this effort can be found under [Agenda Item X](#) in your board meeting materials.

UC Distinguished Visitor Program

In a meeting following our May 11 SNFCI Regional Council meeting, SNC staff and members of our SNFCI Council Policy workgroup met with Bob Ewing who represents the William Main Distinguished Visitors Program at UC Berkeley. They would like to

focus this year's program on the WIP, which means they will be making "distinguished visitors" who have relevant experience available to advise us. More information will be provided to the SNC Board as this effort gains momentum.

WIP Partner Engagement

We have received a lot of positive feedback from the March Summit, and are building on that momentum to more specifically engage our partners in the WIP. SNC staff met with California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), who has included the WIP and a specific identification of forest health projects in their proposed Guidelines for Round 2 of their Proposition 1 funding. Other partners being engaged in WIP conversations include but aren't limited to the State Water Resources Control Board, the new state director of Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and we continue to work closely with CAL FIRE Director Ken Pimlott to ensure that we are most effectively referencing and leveraging each other's efforts.

The SNC staff also continues 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 and Forest Climate Action Team, a team working on the implementation of the Prescribed Fire Memorandum of Understanding, and the Sierra LiDAR Cooperative Discussion Group.

Funding

Financing implementation of on-the-ground restoration work remains one of the biggest challenges facing the Region and the WIP. The SNC staff has been working on multiple fronts to facilitate increased levels of state funding and investment from multiple sources and agencies including CAL FIRE, Wildlife Conservation Board, Department of Fish and Wildlife, State Water Board, OHV Commission, Housing and Community Development, and University of California (additional information is in [Agenda Item XI](#)). Staff has also been assisting regional partners to apply for and secure funding and investments from federal agencies, private foundations, and research institutions, and continues to provide technical assistance and capacity-building training to local community organizations. Spurred on by the emergent nature of the tree mortality issue, staff has also developed a productive relationship with the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development and assisted in identifying multiple opportunities to attract new forest-product business ventures into the region.

Next Steps

Staff will work with the USFS and other partners to implement the WIP Regional Strategy, updating as needed to reflect necessary course changes.

Once WIP Watershed Rapid Assessments are complete, SNC, USFS, and other WIP partners will start reviewing and ground-truthing the findings, following by an analysis to determine the dominant storylines that emerge about the conditions, restoration needs, and opportunities in these Watershed Assessment Areas. We anticipate engaging a

broader group 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.

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 and/or WIP Advisory group, building as much as possible off existing groups and partnerships.

SNC staff will continue to push towards the identification and consideration of successful models for delivering restoration activities, including the development of more specific criteria for selection 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.

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. 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.