

## **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 well-being.

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. The various forest collaboratives are also continuing their work to carry out this same mission on the ground in specific watersheds and communities.

At the June 2014 Board meeting, the Board directed SNC staff to develop a plan that ensures the issues being addressed under SNFCI were the organization's top priority. In response to this direction, the [State of Sierra Nevada's Forests Report](#), which represents the current understanding of forest conditions and potential consequences, was developed by staff and approved by the Board at the September 2014 Board meeting.

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 of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP). 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 WIP was officially launched in March of this year, with the Board approving a [Plan](#) to guide development of the WIP. The USFS has indicated that all of the National Forests in the Sierra Nevada will be active participants in the WIP, and also co-hosted the March 4 WIP Summit with the SNC, which was a critical first step in continuing work to engage key partners in the WIP.

In late June 2015, staff worked with the USFS and California Natural Resources Agency (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](#). President Obama's Priority Agenda for Enhancing the Climate Resilience of America's Natural Resources called for the identification of place-based, landscape-scale resilience strategies. While this designation didn't result in new funding for the Region, it did shine a light on the importance of the Sierra to California, and supported the work SNC and its partners are striving to accomplish through the WIP.

In July 2015, SNC staff and representatives from USFS Region 5 met with Secretary John Laird and 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.

Boardmembers Bob Kirkwood and Pam Giacomini continue to serve as the Board committee providing oversight and guidance for the WIP effort.

### **Current Status**

The SNC staff has continued to meet with partners to identify opportunities to leverage efforts to further the shared objectives under the WIP. On October 8, 2015, SNC and USFS hosted a special webinar to update existing and potential partners on the current status of the WIP. This webinar included an overview of the WIP, a high-level review of the WIP Regional Strategy (Strategy), and opportunities through which interested parties can endorse and engage with the WIP ([Attachment A](#)). A total of 132 individuals participated in this webinar. These participants were from a diverse range of interests and geographic locations, both inside and outside of the Sierra Nevada Region.

A key next step in moving the WIP forward is the development of a Regional Strategy to further define the steps, process, and outcomes of implementation (a draft Regional Strategy is included in [Attachment B](#) of this agenda item). This draft reflects primarily the work of SNC staff, and will be used to solicit input and engagement from existing and new partners, following review and approval of the USFS Region 5. As such, it will likely be modified prior to becoming final and will be updated as needed to reflect necessary course changes.

The WIP Regional Strategy describes in detail the process and timeline for the assessment of restoration needs that is currently underway. The watershed assessments will include information developed by the USFS and other federal agencies on lands they manage, as well as information gathered by the Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC), including other lands and broader watershed information. It also describes Regional efforts related to increased investment, addressing key policy issues, and development of additional restoration related infrastructure. Finally, the Strategy describes the process of project identification and implementation, the ultimate key objective of the WIP.

Here are some of the other key activities under the WIP over the last three months:

### **Integrated Regional Conservation and Development Program (IRCAD)**

The SNC and USFS staff have engaged in initial discussions with the CA Strategic Growth Council (SGC) regarding the potential of the WIP serving as a pilot project for this program. The IRCAD was launched in October 2014 to “coordinate state agencies for the development and implementation of an Integrated Regional Planning approach to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of regional development and natural resource conservation in California.” The SGC and CA Biodiversity Council have entered to an agreement in support of the IRCAD. (The Biodiversity Council is comprised of agency leaders of state and federal agencies, and local government.) While it is somewhat

unclear as to all of the implications of becoming a pilot, it would significantly heighten the recognition of the WIP with state and federal agencies, and could result in additional support for the effort. Staff will continue to explore the opportunity, in consultation with Boardmembers Kirkwood and Giacomini.

#### Funding

The SNC Funding Team has undertaken a number of activities in support of WIP objectives, including the following:

- Published 11 Grant Research Memos and updates identifying available funds for a broad range of WIP related activities.
- Provided 43 funding development consultations to partners seeking advice about funding opportunities.
- Conducted one grant-writing workshop for 13 participants representing ten organizations.
- Developed a fund-tracking tool to monitor investments in the SNC Region from all sectors.
- Coordinated with other Proposition 1 funding agencies to increase exposure of WIP-related project opportunities.
- Coordinated with USFS Region 5 on developing strategies to identify potential federal funds and programs that support the WIP.

#### Restoration Assessments

The SNC staff has continued to work with public and private land managers to develop the templates for approaching implementation of the WIP restoration needs assessments at the watershed level in lands across a variety of ownership. This includes close coordination with USFS and Sierra Coordinated Resources Management Council (SCRMC) partners through regularly scheduled inter-agency WIP Team meetings.

The SNC continues to coordinate with USFS Region 5 and the Tahoe National Forest, who are making final refinements to the watershed assessment approach at the forest level. The template should be completed by the end of this calendar year, and is designed to answer the question, "What restoration projects need to be implemented in the next 10 years to return the watersheds of this forest to a state of ecological resilience?" The assessments will identify the work that is needed and could be done with additional resources/funding, as well as identify other key constraints affecting needed restoration efforts. As a part of this process, the Forests will also have a list of current planned forest restoration activities, which will include NEPA/CEQA-ready projects. This will help build an understanding what is currently planned, so a comparison can be made of the current pace of restoration versus what is actually needed or feasible.

Once finalized, the template will be rolled out on the USFS lands throughout the Region, with the end goal for completion of assessments on all National Forests in the Sierra Nevada by June 2016. The Stanislaus National Forest is currently on board as the next

forest to complete the assessment process. SNC staff and USFS Region 5 are also committed to work with the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest to ensure they are included in the various aspects of the WIP.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Mother Lode Field Office was in the process of developing a pilot assessment on their lands, to complement the assessment on the Tahoe National Forest. Unfortunately, the Butte Fire derailed this effort, though it will be resumed in the near future. A template will be developed based on this pilot that will then be adopted by the other BLM field offices throughout the Sierra Nevada Region as part of the WIP. SNC is also in conversation with National Park Service leadership in order to determine the best ways to engage them in the WIP as well.

The Placer Resource Conservation District, through the SCRMC Joint Powers Authority, is conducting pilot data collection process at the watershed level in the area overlapping the Tahoe National Forest and BLM Mother Lode Field Office assessment areas. This pilot assessment is expected to be completed by the end of 2015. Once this approach has been confirmed, SCRMC will conduct similar assessments in the other Sierra Nevada watersheds. Completion of these assessments is anticipated in the first half of 2016.

### **Next Steps**

Staff will take the Board-approved draft of the WIP Regional Strategy and continue to work with the USFS and other partners to finalize the document.

Staff will continue discussions with the Strategic Growth Council to determine its viability as a pilot project of the Strategic Growth Council Integrated Regional Conservation and Development Program (IRCAD).

The assessment phase of the WIP will identify general information and needs for each Sierra watershed and provide a better understanding of more overarching regional needs, opportunities, and challenges. With a solid knowledge base established and the help of diverse partners, assessments will be utilized to identify critical areas in need of immediate action. The WIP provides the opportunity to consider new models for delivering restoration activities, likely with one or more pilot areas considered for exploration of such models.

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 continue to 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**

Staff recommends that the Board approve the draft Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Plan Regional Strategy and direct staff to finalize it following review and input from the USFS and other partners.