

# County leaders back ‘Initiative’

Written by Michael Kay, The Union Democrat , Sonora, CA  
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Calaveras County on Tuesday became the first backer of a new regional effort to bring together loggers, environmentalists, scientists and politicians to better the economy, environment and quality of life in the Sierra Nevada.

After about three hours of debate covering both the grand philosophical principles at play and the minutiae of the statement’s language, the Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a four-page resolution of support.

The Sierra Nevada Forest and Community Initiative, as the effort is known, is a product of a much longer series of debates between various regional players, from the business, nonprofit and governmental realms. The initiative is coordinated by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a recently created state agency charged with providing strategic planning in the region.

Despite the effort’s collaborative approach, several supervisors — including some from widely divergent philosophical outlooks — were skeptical.

The initiative aims to help prevent forest fires and damage to the watershed and air quality, plus lower unemployment and convert wood products into renewable energy sources.

Supervisor Merita Callaway said she supported all those goals, but wondered if the initiative was just more talk.

“I’m not really sure why we’re doing this. All this is saying is, ‘Let’s collaborate,’” she said.

While the conservancy’s board has already approved the initiative, it is being taken to the relevant government agencies — the project area runs from Amador County to Bakersfield — to ensure that everyone buys in, said Brandon Sanders, the Mount Whitney area representative for the conservancy.

Lack of cohesion and poor communication between those working in different areas has been a critique of the conservancy in other endeavors, he said.

Supervisor Tom Tryon agreed with others on the board that the forests on government land, at least in Calaveras County, are “in a state of total abandonment and disarray,” and thus in dire need of maintenance.

Yet he sees too much “social engineering” in other U.S. Forest Service initiatives and wanted to be assured the self-described “sustainable initiative” would not be tied to the public dole.

“I don’t want something that is going to be a huge government subsidy in perpetuity,” Tryon said.

The conservancy is funded by fees from vanity license plates, Sanders informed him, and has no regulatory power whatsoever. It aims to convene and mediate between groups in the region to establish policies to achieve the initiative’s goals. Funding for some individual projects will come from grants.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky, who has worked for about five years to help develop the initiative, repeatedly urged his fellow members to support the resolution.

Other states, like Arizona, have successfully used such partnerships to avoid the bog of

litigation that engulfs so many forest-related projects in California.

“We’re so far behind the cutting edge we’re not even in the game,” Wilensky said.