

Sierra Nevada Conservancy • Policy Guidance

This Policy Guidance document identifies and describes the suite of issues in which Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) staff is active. These issues are consistent with the SNC Strategic and Action Plans and the SNC has worked with our partners to identify objectives that would be most meaningful in the Region. We have further analyzed the challenge to identify policy changes that would achieve these objectives in the most efficient and economical way. As the policy landscape of the nation and state change, it is possible that new opportunities might come forward; staff is always looking for ways to better address Regional challenges. Through this list, the hope is that synergies and connections between issue areas, and with our partners and outreach targets, are better identified. This document is informational in nature and not intended to reflect official policy positions of the SNC Governing Board.

ECOLOGICAL WATERSHED RESTORATION

Watershed restoration is paramount to, and at the core of, meeting the SNC's policy objectives, and is embodied in the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) objectives and implementation. Diverse watersheds, managed for multiple benefits and resilient to climatic change, are necessary to move California into a future with climate change.

1. The services provided by the Sierra, depended on by Regional inhabitants and the state as a whole, demand that the pace and scale of restoration activity increase at least two to three times current levels.
2. Source watersheds, and the streams, meadows, and forests making them up, are of multi-benefit to California and the nation; they should be managed on a large-landscape scale, in consideration of all of these benefits.
3. Current forest policy is not working; effective watershed management must innovate through legal, environmental, and collaborative ways, taking advantage of in-place mechanisms, such as existing contracting templates, and conceptual models, such as partnering opportunities.
4. A unified approach to forest management, including all affected parties to minimizing legal issues and environmental harm, is necessary to avoid issues of delay and backlog.
5. Previously-neglected areas, such as steep slopes and Protected Activity Centers, should be addressed by using environmentally sound, existing, innovative mechanisms as a model.
6. Local communities are essential partners in effective watershed management.
7. Both costs and benefits of watershed management should be integrated into the cost of providing services to "downstream beneficiaries" (water, air, recreation, etc.).
8. As funding is available, the SNC will fund projects identified as meeting WIP goals, in alignment with organizational values as well as funding requirements.
9. Abandoned mine lands are a serious issue for habitat, water quality, and recreation uses, and affect downstream users and environments throughout California. Addressing these lands at the source through cleanup and restoration is more effective than addressing the downstream pollution issues alone.

TREE MORTALITY

The tree mortality issues besetting the southern Sierra over the last three years is moving north. The extent of this issue has already impacted the ability of affected forests to act as a carbon sink. The condition of these forests will alter California's fiscal, health, and environmental future in terms of increased wildfire and corresponding carbon emissions, as well as decreased carbon storage capacity, habitat diversity, and recreation opportunities. Forest restoration is imperative to preserve the services provided by Sierra forests, to Sierra communities and to the state at large.

10. Green forests must be managed to prevent the spread of bark beetle infestations northward.
11. All state agencies are essential in developing a better understanding of how future forests might look, act, and be managed to preserve their statewide benefits.

PRESCRIBED AND MANAGED FIRE

Prescribed and managed fire is an important element on the landscape, providing land managers with a cost-effective and, if managed properly, low-risk management tool. For this reason, the SNC recently signed the Fire Memorandum of Understanding, finalized in November 2015, to increase the use of fire to meet ecological and other management objectives.

12. Prescribed fire is an important tool and there should be more opportunities to make use of it, where feasible and appropriate. Managed fire is likewise an important restoration tool that can be utilized at a much larger scale, in areas and conditions where appropriate.
13. Barriers to implementing fire use should be minimized, such as by improving smoke management coordination and engaging in public education and outreach.
14. Expand the training opportunities and resource/expertise sharing in order to more effectively and efficiently increase capacity to use wildland fire in the Sierra.

WILDFIRE

Research tells us that not all wildfire is bad. In fact, it is a required element in a healthy, balanced ecosystem. However, as climate change affects precipitation and temperature patterns, burn patterns suggest that more intense fires, with greater severity, are becoming the norm. Protecting ecosystems from devastating wildfires is part of preserving the state's adaptive capacity.

15. Wildland firefighting costs have been growing annually. Federal payment of these costs has historically come out of US Forest Service programmatic funding, decreasing funding dedicated to on-the-ground prevention treatments. Firefighting costs should come from an emergency fund, managed through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) per proposed federal legislation.
16. Increased funding for fuels treatment from a variety of sources, such as the State Responsibility Area fees collected by CAL FIRE, will be an essential part of meeting this need.
17. Wildfire is the result of decades of counter-productive forest and watershed management policies. Thus, these events should be seen as human-caused.
18. Fire events in source watersheds affect California as a whole; managing the forest to avoid these impacts is a public benefit and should be funded as such.

CARBON AND CLIMATE CHANGE

California's forests represent significant carbon storage capacity, benefitting both the state and the nation through emissions mitigation. Responsible and responsive forest and watershed management will ensure that these benefits continue into the future, adding resilience and adaptive capacity to California's response to climate change.

19. Carbon capture is a benefit accruing to all Californians. Based on the huge benefit of the Sierra in terms of carbon sequestration, the investment of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds into forest management is a critical use of that resource.
20. The changing hydrologic and temperature regime suggests that forest management, including post-fire restoration, should be implemented with this future in mind.

WATER SUPPLY AND QUALITY

The Sierra is the source of more than 60 percent of California's developed water supply and is used by millions of people, hundreds of thousands of agricultural acres, and a multitude of wildlife species throughout California. Healthy watersheds provide cool, clean water more consistently, benefitting instream flow, downstream users, groundwater basins, and the ecosystem as a whole.

21. Benefits accruing to "downstream users" should be identified, quantified, and valued financially. Investment mechanisms with the intent of preserving those benefits should be identified and implemented.
22. In addition to cleaning up the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and its tributaries, investment in addressing the source and mobilization mechanisms of mercury and other heavy-metal pollution, especially related to abandoned mine lands, is imperative to avoiding continued degradation.
23. Sediment is the nation's primary water pollutant; upper watersheds need to be managed so that shedding sediment is minimized, preserving reservoir capacity, riverine habitat, and water quality.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The Sierra Nevada's diverse human communities, environments, and economies add to the Region's strength and adaptive capacity. Statewide education regarding the benefits of a healthy Sierra is essential in meeting the expectations of communities, counties, the state, and the nation as far as what the Sierra can deliver.

24. Native American tribes are sovereign nations and are important partners in caring for California's watersheds. Their legal rights and legacy of continuous habitation make them unique and exceptional partners in developing strategies for long-term investment.
25. Forest restoration efforts should incorporate local capacity building and local-preference contracting.
26. Rural challenges are amplified when they are not recognized; disparities in resources, access, and opportunities should be recognized as a disadvantaged status and addressed through strategic state investment.

FOREST PRODUCTS AND BIOMASS UTILIZATION

Finding viable markets for small-diameter trees and other logging slash, as well as expanding markets for traditional wood products, are important components in making forest and watershed management economically feasible. Innovative uses are welcomed, and added investment is likely necessary.

27. Finding markets for forest biomass, especially making use of small-diameter trees and logging “slash,” is a priority issue for economical and sustainable forest management, as well as for rural job development.
28. Bioenergy is a viable, reliable energy source, providing jobs to low-income communities. It should be incentivized as such until such time as it is again economically viable, and the legal and policy impediments, except those addressing human and ecological health and safety, should be abolished.

RECREATION

The continued success of recreation as an economic driver in the Sierra depends on a resilient landscape, inclusive and broad marketing, and the availability of safe and modernized recreation opportunities. The rural and generally disadvantaged nature of the Sierra demands outside investment. This investment can come from external recreation/visitor dollars, but also must come from in-state sources in order to shore up a continued statewide benefit.

29. Recreation is an important contributor to rural communities' economies and should be planned for at the executive level with an eye to the future.
30. Developed recreation opportunities, in addition to extensive federal lands, is important to balancing use and access, as well as attracting diverse populations to recreation opportunities.