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Local, Regional Organizations Partner to Protect Sierra Scenery

(SNC Note: The Sierra Nevada Conservancy has worked with members of the Northern Sierra Partnership to fund specific projects in this area.)

By Matthew Renda, Tribune News Service

NEVADA/PLACER COUNTY — An alliance of environmental nonprofit groups is attempting to set aside swathes of land and water in the Northern Sierra for perpetual protection from development.

The Northern Sierra Partnership — which consists of the Feather River Land Trust, Sierra Business Council, The Nature Conservancy, Truckee Donner Land Trust and The Trust for Public Land — is using a multi-pronged strategy to preserve large-acre plots throughout the northern reaches of the Sierra Nevada.

"We're working to conserve large landscapes," said Northern Sierra Partnership president Lucy Blake.

The partnership leverages both public grants and private donations to plan and implement conservation projects in the area, Blake said. It sometimes purchases large parcels of untouched landscape and, in other cases, it works with private owners already involved in land stewardship to place conservation easements on their land permanently.

Whatever the strategy, the partnership has managed to preserve about 100,000 acres from Alpine to Plumas counties with about 150,000 more acres slated to be kept in their natural state, Blake said.

The strategy

Northern Sierra Partnership uses two main strategies to help conserve land: one is actively purchasing large lots as they come up for sale, while the other, more cost-effective strategy involves working with private landowners who conduct ranching or agricultural operations to put conservation easements on their lands, said partnership president Lucy Blake.

"Conservation easements last into perpetuity," she said.

For instance, Sierra Valley, which is a largely agricultural and ranching area of the Northern Sierra, has been targeted by the partnership for conservation efforts, largely due to its role as the upper reach of the Feather River watershed.

Blake has been working with many of the farmers and ranchers in "the working landscape" to ensure the healthy and bountiful lands currently there are not encroached upon by urbanization.

“You don't always have to purchase the land,” Blake said. “Sometimes it's better to educate current landowners about their options. In Sierra Valley, it's not about public assess, but more about preserving the ranching lifestyle and making sure the value of the wildlife is kept intact.”

Truckee Area

The partnership has concentrated much effort in the early stages of its existence to preserving lands in the Truckee area.

“Once development became limited in the Lake Tahoe area, development efforts were pushed into the Truckee basin,” Blake said.

Waddle Ranch and Independence Lake are two examples of large acre-plots the partnership has helped to procure and preserve.

In the heart of Martis Valley, the largest mountain meadow between Mono Lake and Sierra Valley, Waddle Ranch was once slated for almost 1,200 homes, the partnership's website states.

Independence Lake is a 2.5 mile-long and half-mile-wide lake tucked into a nook between stretching granite peaks in the Little Truckee River watershed.

“Independence Lake is an extraordinary place,” Blake said. “It's one of the only lakes with a natural population of Lahontan cutthroat trout.”

Recreation

Part of the partnership's mission is to ensure some of the targeted portions of the Northern Sierra remain unsullied by development, so the greater public can enjoy the recreational opportunities that abound in the region, Blake said.

The last 20 years have witnessed a regional transition from a regional economy predicated on the exploitation of natural resources, such as timber harvesting and mining to a more ecological tourism-based model.

“The economic statistics show that recreation is major driver in this region,” she said. “Tahoe and Truckee are largely recreation-based economies.”

For this reason, the partnership is working diligently to procure conservation easements for much of the land in proximity to the Pacific Crest Trail as it winds from Desolation Wilderness near South Lake Tahoe to the Sierra Buttes north of Truckee, Blake said.

The partnership also wants land adjacent to Independence Lake to continue to be accessible by members of the public interested in hiking and swimming.

Economy

Steve Frisch, of the Sierra Business Council, said recreation is a portion of the region's economic portfolio, but responsible land stewardship will open avenues toward future industries, as well.

“Good land stewardship opens the way toward biomass utilization,” Frisch said.

Biomass is generally defined as plant matter — living or dead — that is used to generate electricity via steam turbines or direct combustion. In the Sierra, forest management operations, such as forest thinning and removing understory that needs to take place due to widespread fire suppression efforts, have produced much plant matter that could be transformed into electricity at

biomass plants, Frisch said.

“Biomass puts people to work,” he said. “You need skilled foresters, people to remove the biomass, people to work at the plant. We’re talking about hundreds of jobs for local communities.”

Frisch said biomass utilization is one example of emergent sectors that could bring a renewed sense of economic vitality back to the Northern Sierra.

Science

One of the other facets of the partnership's varied mission includes studying the effects of healthy forests on surrounding lands and populaces, Blake said.

Carbon sequestration, which describes the long-term storage of carbon dioxide or other forms of carbon, takes place on a fundamental level in forests.

As trees and other plant life take in carbon dioxide and transform it into the oxygen human beings and other animals breathe, scientists have begun to focus on healthy forests as a fertile place where mitigation or delay of global warming can occur.

“Regardless of the argument over the cause of climate change, the fact remains that this region is seeing significantly lower precipitation levels, (and) high temperatures, which puts the land at greater risk of wild fire and insect infestation,” Frisch said. “The future of this region will depend on how it adapts to climate change.”

Blake said the partnership lands can serve as a laboratory, where researches can analyze the specific costs associated with high-intensity forest management.

“There are lot of research questions to be answered regarding how healthy forests affect lands downstream,” Blake said. “A healthy landscape benefits society.”