

South Lassen Watersheds Group Meeting
Tuesday, July 26th, 2022, 1:00-3:30 pm

Meeting Synopsis:

In the July South Lassen Watersheds Group (SLWG) meeting, the collaborative heard updates on the large-landscape planning efforts happening in the SLWG collaborative footprint (the West Lassen Headwaters Project and the Upper Butte Creek Project). The group also discussed emerging project themes. After that, the group heard from the Forest Service about the progress of their post-Dixie Fire work. The meeting concluded with updates on West Shore and Robbers implementation and funding for the West Lassen Headwaters Project.

Attendees:

Barbara Andrews: Silver Lake Homeowners
Bella Bledsoe: Sierra Institute
Cameron Musser: Butte County RCD
Che Rubalcava-Cunan: Sierra Institute
Dan Ostmann: LAVO
Faith Churchill: Butte County RCD
Helen Leiser: Collins Pine
Jake Blaufuss: SPI
Jim Richardson: LAVO
Jonathan Kusel: Sierra Institute
Kelly Moosinski: LNF
Kristy Hoffman: SNC
Laura Corral: LNF
Mary Davidge: Friends of Warner Valley

Matt Barton: Friends of Warner Valley
Michael Hall: Feather River RCD
Nick Bunch: LNF
Patricia Puterbaugh: Lassen Forest Preservation Gp
Rob Rianda: RCD of Tehama County
Ron Lunder: LAWG
Russell Nickerson: LNF
Sophie Castleton: Sierra Institute
Thomas Tisch: LAWG
Tony Jimenez: LNF
Trey Hiller: Battle Creek Watershed Conservancy
Tuli Potts: SNC
Wil Kingori: Local Resident
Wolfy Rougle: Butte County RCD

Meeting Opening:

There were no comments on previous meeting notes. The group entertained a motion to approve the March meeting minutes, and the minutes were approved. The group entertained a motion to approve the agenda, and the agenda was approved. SLWG members also introduced themselves and identified their positions and affiliated organizations/agencies.

Large Landscape Project Planning: Discussion of Key Themes

West Lassen Headwaters Project (WLHP)

- The WLHP is a 160,000-acre multi-jurisdictional project with some of the last anadromous fish habitat in California. The Lassen National Forest has opened up the NEPA process to the collaborative, and collaborative group members are weighing in on the types of Proposed Actions they want to see on the landscape.
- Over the last 6 months, we have hosted collaborative planning workshops for the WLHP. In February, collaborative workshops focused on existing conditions in the WLH landscape. In April, workshops focused on desired conditions and what collaborative group members want to see on the landscape. The

next round of workshops are planned for August, and the goal will be to determine the types of actions we want to propose in this project that will get us to our desired conditions.

- On August 17th, we will have a proposed actions workshop focused on watershed health; the workshop will cover meadow systems and anadromous streams. The August 25th workshop will focus on proposed actions in forests and around communities and will also cover managed fire, forest health, forest wildlife, and WUI protection.
- Russell commented that the Forest is kicking off the more formal NEPA process for the WLHP. All the work so far has been done by the SLWG, and partners and the Forest are going to draft the PAPN next. At that point, the PAPN goes to the FS website. Then, the Forest will start their official scoping period to the public, and that is an opportunity for collaborative group members to comment again and show support for the project. The FS will get comments back and respond to those comments, as well as get ready for the implementation side of the project. This might include things like additional surveys, prepping units for sales, and other activities. Closer to the end of the NEPA process, the Forest will draft specialist reports. The goal is to have the final EA completed around March 2024. Then, the public gets to comment on the final products. Hopefully, implementation work can start during the summer of 2024.
- Jonathan mentioned that he is appreciative of the Federal agencies opening up the formal NEPA process to the collaborative, and their openness to input in the conception of the project.
- Sophie added that the SLWG is providing input at key decision points throughout the project, and Sierra Institute is crafting that input into the draft PAPN document and then circulating it back to the FS. There will be many ways to provide input on the project throughout the process.
- Trish asked how much of the WLHP area burned in the Dixie Fire.
- Sophie answered that about a third of the project area burned.
- Russell added that we are going to keep the Dixie Fire footprint in current projects. The FS will address burned areas within the projects that already exist. Burned areas outside of existing projects will be covered in a separate NEPA.
- Jim asked when we can apply for funding for implementation. Can we apply before the signed decision? He wants to make sure we are working as quickly as possible to prepare for the next big fire.
- Russell answered that a lot of grant funding comes out prior to May, and we would be taking a bit of a risk applying for implementation funding without the project being totally done yet. We will have to have those conversations as we get closer to that part of the project.
- Kristy mentioned that SNC does fund implementation projects where the decisions are not yet signed. Those projects do take a hit in the “project readiness” category during scoring. That said, it depends on the timing of the funding announcement. If the project is on track, and no one is foreseeing a big issue, projects can still be eligible for funding.
- Jonathan said that the FS has to be a bit careful; a request for funding suggests that a decision has been made on the project.

Upper Butte Creek Project

- Wolfy provided an update on the Upper Butte Creek project. Right now, we are assembling a draft PAPN. The final is expected at the end of September. Scoping will begin in October 2022. Surveyors are assessing existing conditions, but they can't do granular surveying over the entire 20,000 acres. It is just not possible to take stock of everything. We are starting with assessing existing conditions around the WUI, Jonesville, and Butte meadows. Comments that are received on the draft PAPN will inform

the development of alternatives and lead to a draft EA. The draft EA will be made available for comments in late Spring 2023. These comments will help develop the final EA. The target is to have a decision by November 2023.

- Jonathan added that some of the granularity is lost when we go to a larger scale, but we will not get to the needed pace and scale if we look acre by acre.
- Wolfy commented that project acreage does not really matter. What matters is if you can survey and be site-specific or not. If not, we are going to have to accept some uncertainty. We know we are going to need to build a bunch of roads, but we do not know where yet. We do not know exactly the number of acres that need to be thinned each year. We can say here is the analysis of the effects and the likely range of effects. People have different comfort levels with that necessary vagueness.
- Russell said the Forest is working hard to open up the process and make projects as collaborative as they can be. The FS is trying to adjust their timelines so the projects do not overlap too much, so specialists, both internal and collaborative, have time to work on each project. The Dixie Fire will have its own restoration projects and NEPA.
- Jonathan added that a strong process, transparency, and thoughtfulness, will help these projects go forward. They are still somewhat new and experimental. The collaborative group provides a bit of a protective mechanism because it shows support for the project, and that is really important.

Landscape Project Discussion Questions

- Sophie posed the question to the collaborative, how do we promote resilience of wildlife habitat to avoid loss from catastrophic wildfire?
- Sophie mentioned that there are a number of protected activity centers (PACs), both owl and goshawk, in the project area. Some need to be redrawn because of the fire. But even pre-fire, there had been a decline in spotted owls in the Lassen National Forest. What does a successful treatment in a PAC look like? What do we want to see 5 or 10 years down the road?
- Trish mentioned we should be thoughtful about where we are cutting large trees or stagger some treatments in time and space.
- Jake mentioned a field trip on the Plumas NF. During the field trip, they talked a lot about thinning within PACs. Jake encourages the SLWG to read the recent paper written by Malcolm North and Ryan Tompkins about operational resilience. Pretty significant treatment is required to take current forest stands back to a historic stand density index.
- Mary asked if any predictive modeling exists about what the conditions might be in the coming decades. How do our projects account for future climate change?
- Dan commented on some recent climate modeling that UC Berkeley did for the LAVO. We are going to see a warming climate that is hotter and drier, and the fire return interval will increase. We are going to see more fire, covering more areas, more often.
- Nick said he would advocate for us to work towards adaptive management going forward. Thresholds from the past help us think about how ecosystems used to operate well. But we do not know how the ecosystem will look, so we have to be adaptive. We have more fuels and a changing climate, and we have changing vegetation types too.
- Wolfy commented that the part of the forest where managers have the most leeway to reduce density is the WUI. The WUI is changing with climate change; there are faster moving fires and more long-range spotting. We should think about redefining the WUI on the Lassen because we can thin more in the WUI.

- Jonathan said that models are predictive tools, but there are significant changes underway, and we cannot know the magnitude or overall impact.
- Trish commented that the Dixie Fire models totally went out the window. We have been trying to do models for 40 years. We do have to work in the PACs to make them more suitable so they do not burn up. But if we take the forest back to the conditions of 120 years ago, it might be too fast of an adjustment for wildlife. If the Claremont project takes 10 to 15 years to institute, maybe that is ok for the owls. If we do the project all in one season, it might be more worrisome for the owls.
- Jake responded that the Claremont project cannot be done in a short period of time. It is huge and technical. They have to prioritize specific areas first, like the WUI.
- Kelly added that the WUI is a high-priority area. Fire is a pretty quick event. It just took a couple of months for a lot of habitat to be gone. There is no way we can feasibly implement all the acres out there in one season. We just have to move through the project strategically, keep connectivity together and prioritize the WUI.
- The group pivoted to discussing the next discussion question, how do we prepare the landscape for managed fire?
- Sophie mentioned that during a recent ID Team meeting, the group went to view the Mill Creek drainage. It is super steep and super dense. There are no roads and no trails. The team discussed the kind of treatments they are comfortable with in this area. Specifically, they talked a bit about where to mechanically treat to prepare for prescribed fire and where they may have to move quickly and can accept fire as an initial treatment.
- Dan described that there are some prominent ridges and roads that could be good defensible features for fire. More resources would be required to do a burn like this, but mechanical thinning in such steep terrain is unlikely. Prescribed fire is the more likely treatment for that difficult ground.
- Nick mentioned the prescribed burn they did in Warner Valley in the spring right before Dixie. The burn had larger pockets of mortality than they expected. There was less soil moisture. We are going to see more mortality than 15 or 20 years ago, under the same seasonal conditions. We would advocate for putting fire in every area because there is a high potential for it to happen naturally. The other approach is to burn around sensitive areas, but if we get a lightning strike in a sensitive area like a PAC, it could burn it all up.
- Kelly commented on a recent paper by Kyle Merriam focusing on moderate to high severity burned patches in the Dixie Fire that are larger in size. The bigger the patch, the lower the likelihood of owls coming back. The paper has general recommendations on the PACs where we may have a higher likelihood of restoration vs. PACs where such a large patch has been lost, restoration success leading to utilization of the PACs by owls may be lower.
- Russell commented that this is a good discussion. One of the pieces we also have discussed is roads. Often, roads do not get closed the way they should. Russell acknowledges that the Forest needs to be following through into the future and track road closures better.

Post-Dixie Fire Recovery

- Almanor Ranger District Recreation - Dixie Fire Project: The rec project includes trailheads and campgrounds. It is a CE project that is about 250 acres.

- The Forest is also looking at Dixie Fire WUI areas outside the WLHP and UBC projects. This would include areas around Old Station, Silver Lake, Warner Valley, Chester, the Baccala Ranch, and other areas.
- Patricia asked if post-Dixie fire work will mostly be salvage.
- Laura answered no. There are low severity, and moderate severity burned areas that will not be salvage logged. In WUI areas, they will likely do a lot of cleanup. The Forest does not want to limit itself and would like to be able to take a suite of actions.
- Jim asked if the Circle S Ranch and landowners in the Mill Creek area can also be included in the post-Dixie WUI NEPA.
- Russell answered that the Forest will tackle those areas with the WLHP. They do not want to overlap two different NEPAs--WLHP and Post-Dixie Fire NEPA.
- Jake asked about how the Forest was managing hazard trees on roads?
- Russell mentioned that within 150 feet from the side of the road, the Forest is doing some hazard tree removal. Some of this work is being done through the Zoombug project. The Zoombug project includes hazardous trees along Humbug County Road PL 307 and Forest Service Road 26N27. The Forest is working on addressing hazards there more quickly. They are also moving forward on the Region 5 hazard tree removal project. Russell knows that it can be confusing that certain portions and areas are under different pieces of NEPA.
- Russell's goal in the NEPA process is to be as transparent as possible. The Forest is trying to include discussions of their projects in SLWG meetings and give everyone an opportunity to talk through these projects with the Forest and provide input and feedback.

Project Updates

West Shore and Robbers Creek Implementation

- We are working on prepping for timber sales for the West Shore area. There is a contract out for bid for high severity burned areas in the project area. We are also marking along the highways, and working with CalTrans to do roadside improvements. Sierra Institute is preparing for hand thinning by marking trees.
- At Robbers, PCREW is building aspen fencing.

West Lassen Headwaters Project Funding

- Sierra Institute did not receive planning funds for CDFW Prop 1. We are pursuing other sources of funding. We are currently funded by CCI and BOR, and we are submitting to SNC this week for more funding. This funding would provide extra capacity for data collection and environmental analysis and pre-implementation surveys.

Partner Updates

Sierra Nevada Conservancy

- The Wildfire Recovery and Forest Resilience concept proposals are due this Friday at 5 pm. Full applications are due in October.
- Also, the SNC board meeting is coming up on Sep 7th and 8th. They are still ironing out details. The 7th will be a field tour, and the 8th will be the meeting.

Sierra Institute

- Not long ago, Sierra Institute had our SCALE meeting. The SCALE network is now being asked to comment on the further development of the statewide RFFC program. The SCALE network is helping the state think through how to get to a million acres. SI is helping co-lead a workshop with SNC later this week and has invited the SCALE network to participate and provide comments on SNC's draft regional plan. SNC is relying on the SCALE process. Please join if you are interested.
- SI submitted a proposal to the CERF program, which stands for Community Economic Resilience Fund. There are 13 areas in the state, and each area will be allocated \$5 million. The North State is a 10-county region. We should know by August whether we received funding.

Feather River RCD

- FRRCD is doing Dixie Fire recovery work on small, non industrial private lands. They are working on Warner Valley first because the weather comes early there. FRRCD is soliciting bids. We were also awarded an SNC grant to do some reforestation on Collins Pine property.

RCD of Tehama County

- Jim Richardson said congratulations to the RCD of Tehama County, which applied for and received a second grant to do tree removal in Mill Creek. They are already marking trees in the Mineral area.

LAVO

- The Park is focusing on public-facing facilities, such as trailheads, campgrounds, and trail systems. Most of the Park's bridges burned in the wilderness, and they are going to be replaced slowly.
- From a post-fire fuels management standpoint, they are going through the compliance process for removing dead material along roads. This is important to facilitate access for responders. It is critical to maintain defensible roadsides to be part of the prescribed fire program.
- The Park is also continuing our small diameter hand thinning and hand piling in the Mineral headquarters area.

Adjourn