

South Lassen Watersheds Group Meeting
Tuesday, July 25th, 2023, 1:00-3:30 pm

Meeting Synopsis:

In the July South Lassen Watersheds Group (SLWG) meeting, the collaborative heard updates, asked questions, and discussed three projects on the Lassen National Forest--Upper Butte Creek, West Lassen Headwaters, and the Dixie Fire Community Protection Project. The group also heard about where these projects rank on the Lassen National Forest Program of Work. The meeting was planned to conclude with a presentation from Wildlands Network about wildlife connectivity issues on Highway 36, however, the presenter was not present, and the meeting ended early.

Attendees:

Bella Bledsoe: Sierra Institute
Cameron Musser: Butte County RCD
Colt Brockman: DWR
Faith Churchill: Butte County RCD
Gabe Schultz: Cal Fire
Gwen Evans: Sierra Institute
Jake Martin: LNF
Janie Ackley: LNF
Jason Kindopp: DWR
Jim Houtman: Butte County Fire Safe
Council
Jonathan Kusel: Sierra Institute
Kathryn Raeder: RCD of Tehama County
Kelly Mosinski: LNF
Ken Roby: Feather River Trout Unlimited
Kristy Hoffman: SNC
Kyle Rodgers: Sierra Institute
Laura Corral: LNF
Leida Schoggen: Friends of Warner Valley

Mari Galloway: Wildlands Network
Mary Davidge: Friends of Warner Valley
Matt Barton: Friends of Warner Valley
Michael Lee: Friends of Warner Valley
Patricia Puterbaugh: Lassen Forest
Preservation Grp
Phred Starkweather: Battle Creek
Meadows Ranch
Ron Lunder: LAWG
Russell Nickerson: LNF
Ryan Burnett: Point Blue
Sophie Castleton: Sierra Institute
Stephaney Cox: LNF
Thomas Tisch: LAWG
Trey Hiller: Battle Creek Watershed
Working Group
Tuli Potts: SNC
Tyler Woollard: LNF
Wil Kingori: Local Resident
Wolfy Rogle: Butte County RCD

Meeting Opening:

The group entertained a motion to approve the April meeting minutes, and the minutes were approved. The group entertained a motion to approve the agenda, and the agenda was approved. SLWG members introduced themselves and identified their positions and affiliated organizations/agencies.

Upper Butte Creek Project Update

- Wolfy reported to the group that the Lassen shifted the timelines of all projects, which pushed the UBC timeline back about a month. Specialist reports are now due sometime in October. We have a kickoff meeting with our fisheries contractor and Craig tomorrow. The draft EA is now going out in January, and we are working towards a signed decision around June 2024.
- Since scoping, we have created clearer guidelines for when we might remove trees over 30 inches, and specified this would only be for community safety and operational safety. There will also be no removal of shade-intolerant species (e.g., ponderosa pine). We also dropped a couple of herbicides from the PA, which leaves just glyphosate and aminopyralid for invasives, and glyphosate, Imazapyr, and Indaziflam for reforestation. Tyler also did some modeling on where the remaining carnivore habitat is and designed some connectivity corridors. Carnivore populations are still pretty vibrant, and we want to save connectivity for them. Tyler also created an instruction manual for how future managers might be able to recreate this model and network, depending on what happens on the ground (e.g., another fire, tree mortality event).
- Trish - do you know what specific attributes corridors will have?
- Wolfy - We are still working on that. These are complex environments of surface fuels and high canopy cover. We are altering the surface fuel prescription, and leaving a certain number of piles of logs per acre. They will not be burned or scattered like they would be elsewhere, so animals can use those networks. Tyler - our goal is not to prevent treatments, just conduct treatments in a thoughtful way. In the event that we do treat within a carnivore habitat network, our goal is increasing fire resilience of that habitat network. We are making sure that heavily thinned areas do not become barriers to Marten and Fisher movement. Corridors do cross ingress/egress routes, but where they cross, you wouldn't see an extreme level of thinning. Instead, you would see much higher canopy levels and surface fuels. Trish commented that at first the ingress/egress routes sounded like a clear cut, so this is good to hear.
- Wolfy- it is exciting to be heading into the last analysis phase.
- Trish- do ingress/egress routes and fuel breaks even work? I think there is some controversy.
- Wolfy clarified that herbicide would not be used to maintain these routes, and chemicals would only be used for invasive weed control and reforestation. Fuel breaks will be treated with hand thinning, mechanical thinning, and fire. It can be challenging to maintain an open area with so much sun hitting the forest floor.

West Lassen Headwaters Project Update

- Russell - as a Forest we went through our project list, and cleaned it up. The WLHP is project ten on the program of work right now. We went over the abilities of the FS to move these projects forward, across all the projects on the Forest. We did some reprioritization. Through that, there has been a change of the timeline. We are pausing

the project for the whole ID Team. In January, we will have a draft PAPN, and we will be scoping in February. All field surveys scheduled to happen this year are still happening. The project decision date was originally May 2024, and now we are looking at September 2024 for a signed decision.

- Jonathan commented that when there is a shift in timeline, partners run into funding challenges. When we make commitments, they have implications for funding and grants, field seasons, staffing. The shifting of those commitments have implications. This timeline change puts SI in a difficult position.
- Sophie - We had a WLHP community meeting in June in Mineral. Jim and Russell attended and helped facilitate that. SNC funds are also currently supporting a lot of data collection work this summer. Cal Poly Humboldt is leading arc surveys, and we have botany surveys, and eDNA surveys taking place. The new timeline is not changing data collection efforts.
- Russell added that there will still be an opportunity to start a lot of the layout and marking this coming summer. There are some opportunities to move forward, but probably not material removal.
- Program of work - Top 10
 - 1. Dixie Fire Community Protection Project (LNF)
 - 2. Hat Creek Recreation Enhancement Project (Hat Creek RD)
 - 3. PG&E Hazard Tree Project (LNF)
 - 4. Colby Mountain Recreation Project (ALRD)
 - 5. Pike's Point Boat Launch (Eagle Lake RD)
 - 6. MVUM Update (5 Counties OHV; LNF)
 - 7. Backbone Project (Hat Creek RD)
 - 8. Upper Butte Creek (ALRD)
 - 9. Green Badger Restoration Project (Hat Creek RD)
 - 10. West Lassen Headwaters Project (ALRD)
- Many of these projects have been on the list for a long time, and we are trying to clear some.
- Trish - We have not seen anything about the Dixie Fire Community Protection Project, even though it is number one.
- Russell- it is the number one priority, but it is not the farthest along.
- Kyle- Can you share a bit about how the progress of the projects higher on the list affect projects below them to move ahead. If a project does not move, will other projects be pushed back accordingly?
- Russell- I do not see a lot of bumping or adjusting. We took a hard look at these. Projects are at different stages. MVUM Update has been on the list for a long time. It needs to get done, and we are farther along on this.
- Stephaney - It is easy to look at the list and think the FS has to finish 1-5, before we touch ten. But, that is not the case; the list is just a workflow tool. It helps specialists think about where to put their energy. If the hydrologist finishes Dixie Fire Communities,

then they can drop down to 2. If there is no work there, then they go to three. It could be that certain specialists are working on UBC, while the project at the number three location is experiencing a roadblock.

- Kyle commented that when projects up front get delayed, the reality is that it often affects others.
- Stephaney added that the FS so appreciates partners stepping in to fill gaps by providing expertise and personnel. There are some roles that partners cannot fill; for example, partners cannot review specialist reports. Only our specialists can sign off and review.
- Stephaney commented that shortly the FS is going to be sending a POW process. We are putting together steps for getting a project on the POW. It is a proposal form. We are going to get you that info in the next month.
- Jonathan urged the FS to take advantage of partners, so the specialists can focus on the things that no one else can do. Utilize partners to free up agency folks.

Dixie Fire Community Protection and Swain Mountain Experimental Forest Vegetation Management Project

- Jake M. provided an update from the FS. This project just had a roster adjustment, and the project lead is now Frank Heidie. We are really close to finalizing the PAPN. We are working on taking a bit of fluff out. Unless snow falls early this year, surveys will finish this fall. We plan to have specialist reports this September, and a draft EA mid December. We are planning for a draft decision notice by the end of February, and a signed decision is anticipated by the end of July.
- Bella - this group is interested in hearing more about the project - due to its proximity to communities that SLWG members live in. Due to this, SI developed a Google form for people to provide input and ask questions about the project.
- *Slide summaries at the end of the minutes.*
- Jonathan asked if Jake or Russell wanted to respond to any points on the slides
- Jake commented that as for removing all trees, that's not the plan. The goal is 7-15 tonnes per acre, depending on the stand. 10 tonnes per acre around carnivore nesting sites. We will retain snags for wildlife.
- There will be a public meeting in late August with an in-person and virtual option, everyone is encouraged to attend.
- Russell added that there are no project level plan amendments included in this project to remove timber on steep slopes. We are required by FS direction to retain cover. We are taking Michelle Coppoletta's research into consideration for this project. An EA can only be 75 pages and you have one year to complete it (from scoping until the time it's signed). This has been identified and pushed by the regional and Washington office in the last year or so. The LNF's goal is to make more readable/concise environmental documents that are accessible to the public.

- Jonathan added that many group members feel LNF hasn't done much public outreach. The SLWG has done a good job on having difficult discussions about topics like herbicide use for other projects. It is a hallmark of the SLWG to have iterative, consultative conversations.
- Bella- when the PAPN document comes out, will there be any sense of where reforestation is being proposed/ how many acres?
- Russell - Yes. there should be a project map that shows potential areas for reforestation. We are trying to show as much as we can, based on all the info we have at the time.
- Mary - One thing that would help property owners close to the area, is to understand what 'great' would look like in the decades to come. We don't understand where you're headed with this and what the outcomes you're hoping to achieve long term are. If we understand this, we could better provide input on some of the strategies you're using.
- Jake - It's tough to read a 75 page EA. I'd direct Mary to our 'desired conditions' paragraphs.
- Russell - We want forests around our communities, but also need to balance diversity of species. The best case is our communities are defensible spaces so we're ready for the next fire. A successful project would result in green forest after the fire goes through. We want a variety of habitats: forested communities, riparian areas, defensible space. We want to prioritize reforestation where our highly productive soils are. We need to talk more about the regulations around replanting. There's a "replant act" that recently came out from Congress - the acreages they mandate to reforest are high.
- Trish - I would caution against having an EA that a 6th grader could read. Many readers want more depth, and the FS will likely have to revisit it. It needs enough detail. I'm guessing there are people on this call that know some areas of the forest that have been thinned that are in good shape. The Eagle Lake RD has thinned and burned a lot of land. We need to look at examples of what good project results look like, and have it guide us.
- Matt - this project is spread out over many areas that are not in the true WUI. We want more clarity on what counts as WUI, and how the FS defines defense/threat zones. We'd like to see targeted prioritization on where these funds will be used. Allocate resources to the true "WUI"/defensible space and then allocate funds to maintain these treatments over the long term. What about a revolving fund to maintain buffer zones into the future? We're working on timescales that are much longer than our own lives.
- Jonathan - agency budgets on an annual cycle is problematic. It's challenging to ensure funding for continued management and maintenance of what gets done.
- Russell - that's part of our collaborative group. This group is how we help leverage future funds and keep maintenance going. As we get initial implementation in, we need to secure maintenance/underburning funds.
- Jake - We consulted with fire staff and buffered the project in a way that we think fire would approach the communities and WUIs.

- Wolfy - (in chat) Here in Butte County, we're also very interested in the idea raised by Mary and others: Let's take groups back to areas that were treated 5, 10, 20 years ago and, together, let's develop some kind of collaborative consensus on which treatments hold up well. There's not a lot of 20-year-old treatment acreage to visit around here, but this kind of consensus will be increasingly important as these huge projects start rolling out and contractors start getting pressured to treat 10K or 20K acres a year.
- Laura - I was involved in establishing some of the boundaries and we took boundaries to logical features on the landscape, such as roads and trails, where fire could be held.
- Ryan B. - (in chat) my observations in the Dixie is what "held up" well was not strongly correlated with how they had been treated but rather strongly driven by fire weather - areas that had been treated including "nature nooks" in the middle of SPI 40 acre clear cuts had complete mortality (like up feather river drive)
- Matt B (in response to Ryan in chat) - I don't disagree. To date, CalFire has not conducted any analysis of "lessons learned" with respect to forest treatments and the impact of those treatments on fire progression during the Dixie. Nor are there currently any plans to conduct such an analysis. In the absence of that information, unfortunately, we risk falling back on old methods and practices which likely will not alter the course of future fires. But here we are...
- Mary - Finding precedence for what "good" treatments look like post-wildfire is important. I think this is important for this group to think through.

Adjourn: Next Meeting in September

Dixie Fire Form Summary Slides:

Project Suggestions

Process - Communicate Plans and Incorporate the Best Available Science:

1. Communicate with local communities about the project plan and create opportunities for listening to the needs of those communities.
2. Utilize the most credible science to define the proposed actions, aligning actions with the long-term goals.

Risk - Prioritize Human Health and Well-Being:

1. Consider the use of any herbicide and the impact they may have on wildlife, the environment, and recreational communities throughout the forests.
2. Assure human health and water safety are not jeopardized in the near or long term.

Project Suggestions

Strategy - Have a Long-Term Vision

1. Focus on the climate resilience of forests, watersheds, etc.
2. Do not adversely affect the land's capacity to regenerate itself.
3. Use the opportunity the Dixie Fire has given us to shift the composition of the forest more toward oaks and shade-intolerant pines.
4. Make it easier to follow-up with prescribed fire.

Community Protection – Define How the Project Will Use Limited Resources Effectively:

1. Thin remaining vegetation to reduce the future threat of wildfire.
2. Create fire-defensible space around the WUI. 48,000 acres is substantial, so it is important to define the project more clearly and identify the most critical WUI areas.

Project Concerns & Questions

Post-Fire Treatment Design and Decision-Making Concerns:

1. Determine what areas are appropriate for reforestation given climate change,
2. Consult experts about proper reforestation practices.
3. Prioritize more effectively. Concentrate time, money, and human resources to address the forested areas that are actually near residential areas. Follow up this initial effort over a 20-50 year period to ensure that the approaches used have the desired effects.
4. Do not remove all dead trees; leave some of the dead material.

Project Concerns & Questions

Remaining Green Forest Concerns:

1. Does the FS plan to develop 'shaded fuel breaks' around communities, or is another type of recurring fuel reduction proposed?
2. Do not remove green, thriving, and old growth trees.

Design Concerns:

1. Consider the use of herbicides in this watershed carefully.
2. Limit timber harvesting on steep slopes to avoid severe erosion and sedimentation.

Project Concerns & Questions

Process Concerns:

1. Does the project plan take into consideration the Caribou Wilderness Area?
2. Ensure that the USFS does not do initial work, without the seeing it through long-term.
3. Set a new precedent for post wildfire restoration and use an effective collaborative process. I like to imagine a field trip 10-15+ years from now where all stakeholders consider the project to be highly successful.