

South Lassen Watersheds Group Meeting
Tuesday, November 28th, 2023, 1:00-3:30 pm

Meeting Synopsis

In the November South Lassen Watersheds Group meeting, the collaborative heard updates on the West Lassen Headwaters Project and then broke out into small groups to discuss draft proposed action maps. After the breakout rooms, the group reconvened to share the main takeaways and themes. The group also heard updates from the Lassen National Forest and partners about progress on the Upper Butte Creek Project and the Dixie Fire Community Protection Project. The meeting concluded with a discussion of the upcoming National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Keystone Agreement proposal for the West Lassen Headwaters Project.

Attendees

Aaron Brazzanovich Jr: Susanville Indian Rancheria
Andy Trent: US Fish and Wildlife Service
Barbara Andrews: Silver Lake Homeowners Assoc.
Bella Bledsoe: Sierra Institute
Bethany Rouse: Plumas Corporation
Bobby Howe: Collins Pine
Dan Ostmann: LAVO
Debra Rasmussen: Enterprise Rancheria
Gwen Evans: Sierra Institute
He-Lo Ramirez: Mechoopda Tribe
Heidi Van Gieson: LNF
Jade Elhardt: Sierra Institute
Jim Houtman: Butte County Fire Safe
Council
Jim Richardson: LAVO
Jonathan Kusel: Sierra Institute
Joss Hanna: Circle S Ranch
Karine Hunt: SPI
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
Lorena Gorbet: Maidu Summit Consortium
Martha Davis: Silver Lake Homeowners Association
Mary Davidge: Friends of Warner Valley
Matt Barton: Friends of Warner Valley
Michael Hall: Feather River RCD
Petra Silverman: RCDTC
Phred Starkweather: Battle Creek
Meadows Ranch
Russell Nickerson: LNF
Ryan Burnett: Point Blue
Sophie Castleton: Sierra Institute
Stephaney Cox: LNF
Tricia Bratcher: US Fish and Wildlife
Wolfy Rogle: Butte County RCD

Meeting Opening

The group entertained a motion to approve the July meeting minutes, and the minutes were approved. The group entertained a motion to approve the agenda, and the agenda was approved.

West Lassen Headwaters Project Short Updates

- Sophie updated the group on summer 2023 survey progress within the project area.
 - Archaeology - We need about 50k acres surveyed for archaeology. SI has funded 8k acres, and they were completed this summer. We have about 30k acres on track to get surveys through additional agreements.

- Botany - Surveys took place this summer in the WUI and wetland areas.
- Aquatics - We had about 100 eDNA samples funded through SNC. Not all the surveys have been collected yet. Our goal is to get about 30-50 in the anadromous streams.
- Wildlife - Surveys have been completed by LNF.
- Timeline Reminder
 - There have been lots of changes due to other projects on LNF and the revised program of work. With our revised timeline, we plan to be scoping by Feb 2024, and have specialist reports and EA in the early spring. This will have us on track for a signed NEPA decision in September 2024.
- Pre-fire Hazard Modeling
 - We are exploring a partnership with Don Lindsay from the California Geological Survey's Burned Watershed Geohazards program to conduct pre-fire modeling of post-fire hazards. Essentially this means modeling the potential risk for debris flow if a fire comes through again.
- Mineral Rx Fire - Next Steps
 - The Park intends to do some pile burning on NPS land around Mineral this winter. The Park and FS are looking into a cross-boundary burn on FS/NPS land. This would be about a hundred acres. Russell confirmed that Deb B. has approved the NEPA adequacy of an older NEPA document.
 - SI will follow up with Dan, Laura, Russell, and others to solidify the next steps.
 - The Park has burned about 7 acres of piles so far.
- Engagement with Regional Office - Use of Emergency Authorities
 - SI is working with the Lassen National Forest and the Regional Office to determine whether an emergency authority could be used to do expedited implementation this summer to protect the Mineral community.
 - We are only considering emergency authorities for the West Lassen Headwaters Project where it is most important and where there is social license for actions on the ground.
 - The location around Mineral that is being considered is about 3k acres.
 - Q: What would public outreach look like for Mineral community members?
 - A: The outreach would look similar to what has already been taking place: public meetings, maps, field tours, etc.
 - Jim also announced that there would be an upcoming leadership transition at LAVO when Jim retires. Jim will stay on in a volunteer capacity.
 - Jim added that the community of Mineral has been supportive of expedited action; no one has voiced objections so far, but people do have concerns about aspects such as owl conservation and smoke/air quality with prescribed fire. We will just need to make sure that we only conduct treatments that are not controversial when using emergency authorities.

- Heidi asked about timber sales vs. service contracts. What do we need to do for prep to ensure we can implement it when we get an emergency authority?
- A: We will begin conversations about this soon. We are just not quite there yet.
- Ryan B. - We will have lots of saw logs and material going to mills to do meaningful fuel reduction around Mineral. These are productive forests.
- The RCD of Tehama County offered to use their network and newsletter to help with outreach if needed.
- SI reiterated that areas will be eliminated from a potential emergency authority if there are concerns about thinning density or CSO habitat.

Break-Out Rooms to Discuss Draft Proposed Action Maps

- SLWG members broke out into breakout groups to discuss maps of proposed actions within the project area for about 20 minutes. After the breakout groups, each group reported on their primary discussion points.
- Bella's Group: 1. We have to be thoughtful about how many acres we hand thin; 50,000 acres of hand thinning is too much; it will take way too long. 2. The devil is in the details; these are broad maps, but as we talk more about the details of how to thin in PACs, and how to treat the roadless areas, there needs to be more conversation. These maps are very broad strokes. 3. We need to treat riparian areas! We cannot just leave them out of treatment, or they will all burn. We need to talk about how to safely treat those areas.
- Gwen's group: Our group discussed wanting to represent emergency authority areas on the maps. We also want to highlight the need for cross-boundary collaboration.
- Kyle's group: Our group had questions and discussions about the Deer Creek corridor. We need to work carefully by anadromous streams; there is some concern about site prep in these areas.
- Sophie's group: The fire management map has discontinuous/redundant features (e.g., around Sifford Mountain). Is it reasonable to maintain all these? This group would like to know the distinction between lines that are POD boundaries and lines for Rx Fire application. Also, although we know we'll use IDFs, sharing broadscale maps showing so much mechanical treatment can bring up concerns. The group would also like to add WUI to the reforestation map. After WUI, where would you treat? We should add POD, subwatershed, or something else to parse out where to go next. The group wants to know what criteria will be used to inform prioritization about where to go and in what order. Additional context that could be helpful on the maps includes fire history and existing projects in the area.

Upper Butte Creek Project - Status of the EA

- We have been working on getting draft specialist reports finished. Specialists are working with their contractor counterparts to get these done. A few reports are a little behind schedule because they are working on more detailed aspects of the project.

Hydro and soils will be finished tomorrow. Botany and aquatics are underway. Silv/fuels/AQ and wildlife are expected in the next 2 weeks.

- As the specialist reports are being finished, the EA is being drafted.
- We made some changes to protect species dependent on late seral forests and those that need heavy surface fuels. For ingress/egress routes, the original vision was to leave 10% canopy cover 200 ft on both sides of the road. Some areas will still see that original prescription of 10% canopy cover. Some areas will be left at 40% canopy cover because they overlap with important wildlife habitat. Also, areas that cross riparian corridors will not see as much vegetation alteration. We are still shooting for a draft EA in January. That will go out for legal notice and comment period.
- Ryan- for these 200 buffer zones, will you be cutting trees larger than 30 inches to achieve 10% canopy cover? Wolfy - it is the plan to remove large trees to get down to 10% canopy cover, but we will not do that in HRCAs. Ryan- we should be nuanced and not cut down a 40-inch ponderosa pine just to get to 10% canopy cover. Laura- we will not be cutting any 30-inch-plus ponderosa pine, Jeffrey, western white pine, sugar pine, etc. For a tree over 30" to be cut in the project area, it would have to be a lodgepole or a shade-tolerant species, i.e. true fir, Doug fir, incense cedar. Hazard trees are the exception. Hazard trees over 30" can be cut even if they are shade-intolerant species.
- Ryan- There is a lot of light in areas with 10% canopy cover. We need to worry about certain grasses or invasive species coming back in these areas. We need to think about this and how often we should create these disturbances (reducing canopy cover to 10%). We should not over manage them, creating invasives.

Dixie Fire Community Protection Project - Moving Forward after Scoping (FS staff)

- We are going to reevaluate the proposed action and whether expanding the project is the right move. Why not tackle the whole Dixie area? Some folks are pushing for that. Russell does not have a timeline for a decision on this.
- There is a potential for multiple decisions if we expand the project to the full Dixie footprint.
- Burned areas covered by UBC and WLHP would stay under WLHP and UBC. Only uncovered burned areas would be added to the Dixie Fire Community Protection Project.
- Q: With the potential for a new project boundary, would the scope of the project change as well? Would there be more opportunities for public input?
- A: Russell believes it would be the same general scope of activities, likely with more nuance. The project is still under an agreement with GBI, so they are the lead for public engagement.
- Q: Expanding the project to include the entire Dixie Fire is huge, on top of already large projects that the Forest is taking on. It would also encompass a large portion of the SLWG area. What's the strategy to ensure engagement with the group going forward? Will it go back to scoping? Will there be more discussion before that?

- A: With a size change, the project will probably need to be re-scoped. Russell hopes there will be more opportunities for engagement from that standpoint.
- Q: Other communities in the Dixie footprint are concerned about not being part of the conversation, especially in this condition-based management approach. Is GBI doing public engagement?
- A: GBI is helping with public engagement; they are working on what it will look like.
- Jonathan commented that GBI hasn't participated in public engagement through the SLWG thus far.
- Q: There needs to be more information on the Dixie Fire project. What is the scale of the actions? And where will they occur?
- Jonathan stated that if there is any desire for GBI/FS leadership to communicate with SI/the SLWG, we can explore ways to get better public engagement on round 2 of the scoping.
- Q: How many comment letters were received on the project? What's the impetus to back up and fold it into a larger project?
- A: There were at least 30 comment letters received. Some of the drive to put it into a bigger footprint is that it has already been 2 years since the Dixie Fire, and burned areas outside the current project boundary will need similar treatments, so leadership thinks it could make sense to include both from a NEPA standpoint.
- Q: What happens after the initial cleanup in the project area? If the project gets bigger, how is it going to be maintained?
- A: When the NEPA is complete, you're focused on implementation and maintenance activities. This will set us up for the use of fire as a tool to more effectively treat across the landscape. The Agency wants to spend more time focusing on implementation and less on NEPA. These projects highlight a difference between collaboration and going through the NEPA process (and just getting input through that avenue).

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Keystone Agreement Proposal

- The Forest Service recently signed an agreement with NFWF to act as an intermediary to fund projects. There is no solicitation out yet for the Keystone Agreement, but pre-proposals may be due as soon as Dec 15th.
- We (SI & the FS) had conversations about pursuing a proposal that would fund some of the priority implementation work in the WLHP. That would prevent a delay between the completion of planning and starting implementation.
- Russell: NFWF is focused on using partnerships to push implementation forward, and there is another funding source from NFF focused on contracting out work. The forest is supportive of the WLHP moving forward with this proposal.

Partner Updates

- RCD of Tehama County - Webinar: Collaborative Fuels Reduction Projects (Kathryn)

- The RCD is doing a webinar facilitated by the Cal Poly Swanton Pacific Ranch, talking about collaborative fuel reduction projects. Kathryn included a link to the registration and more info on the webinar.
- Sierra Nevada Conservancy
 - SNC is working on a draft strategic plan that they're bringing to the December board meeting. There will be an opportunity for the public to comment in the spring – it will be available on the website.
 - Congrats on the recommended projects that are going to the March board meeting. The Taylorsville Community Defense Zone project, led by SI, the Ishi Wilderness Environmental Compliance (RCDTC), and the Claremont Implementation Project (Mule Deer Foundation) were recommended for funding. The most competitive round SNC has had yet.
- Lassen Volcanic National Park
 - Progressing well on recovery/rebuilding after Dixie. Drakesbad Guest Ranch should reopen next summer (around July 4th). 3 burned cabins there have been rebuilt.
 - Mill Creek Falls bridges have been replaced, which reconnects trails.
 - The Park continues with the removal of hazard trees in specific areas. There is still more to do along the Park Highway, around the visitor center, in Warner Valley, and up the Juniper Lake Road.
 - Hazard tree log decks will be advertised on GSA within the next week. This is a new approach for Lassen. The Warner Valley area and Manzanita Lake area are occurring first.
 - The whole Warner Valley area up to Drakesbad and the Juniper Lake area will be open next summer.
 - There are hundreds of machine piles to burn.
 - Rx fire work has been focused on the north end of the park. Hand pile burning in the Mineral HQ will be done this winter. Pile burning will set us up for cross-boundary broadcast burning in the Fall of 2024.
 - The Park is also initiating a revision of the Fire Management Plan.
- Sierra Institute - North Fork Forest Recovery Project
 - SI is working with the Plumas NF on a large-landscape post-fire project centered around Indian Valley, from Canyon Dam down to Belden in Hwy 70.
 - Just finished public scoping for the project in early Nov. Anticipating a signed decision on that project in August 2024.
 - Mid-October had Senator John Laird and legislative staffers in the SLWG area planned with Sierra Fund and Sierra Forest Legacy.
- Mill Creek Conservancy - Next Board Meeting at 2 PM on Friday, December 8th, at the Tehama County Library in Red Bluff. Contact Lily Rothrock, Mill Creek Conservancy President, at 916-320-9658 or lilyrothrock@gmail.com, with any questions.
- MSC

- Beavers are back in Tosmom Koyom (Humbug Valley); this is a State pilot project. GPS collars on 2 beavers, which made it back in the area last month.
- Over 3000 acres burned in the Dixie Fire. We divided Humbug into 3 units, 2 of which have been cut. The campground will be ready to open next year.
- Next year, we will be working on 300 acres that burned above the causeway to remove material.
- Point Blue
 - Installed over 100 structures (mostly BDAs) at Child's Meadow. Planted 10,000 sedge plugs in Poppy's fen. TCRCD is finishing part of the project next summer.
 - Already had beavers moving into the structures on the Forest Service land by Child's Meadow.

Conclusion

Next Meeting is on January 23rd