

Partnership aims to reduce wildfire risk, secure healthier, resilient forests in North Yuba River watershed

Environment | November 7, 2019

Submitted to The Union

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A diverse group of nine organizations announced today their commitment to prioritize, plan, and execute forest restoration on an unprecedented scale in the North Yuba River watershed, covering 275,000 acres of the northern Sierra Nevada.

According to a news release, a memorandum of understanding spells out the group's commitment to work together to increase the pace and scale of ecologically-based restoration within the North Yuba River watershed and to prioritize community safety, forest health, and resilience through landscape-scale restoration.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERS

Blue Forest Conservation: An innovative nonprofit organization committed to creating sustainable financial solutions to pressing environmental challenges.

Camptonville Community Partnership: A nonprofit organization with a mission of rural people working together for a safe, sustainable, and healthy community.

National Forest Foundation: Engaging Americans in promoting the health and enjoyment of our public forests.

The Nature Conservancy: One of the world's leading conservation organizations, dedicated to scaling up forest restoration across the Sierra Nevada.

Nevada City Rancheria: The local tribal unit of the Nisenan people of Northern California, passionate about forest health and management, as it is central to their well-being.

Sierra County: Positioned at the headwaters of the North Yuba River, Sierra County's highest priorities include reducing wildfire risk, enhancing forest and watershed health through implementation of fire resilient treatments, and protecting its rural communities.

South Yuba River Citizens League: Uniting the community to protect and restore the Yuba River watershed, SYRCL understands that forest health and resilience are essential to a healthy watershed.

The United States Forest Service – Tahoe National Forest: Sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and managing over 50 percent of the Yuba River watershed, which lies within the Tahoe National Forest.

Yuba Water Agency: A special district in Yuba County, committed to forest health in the entire Yuba watershed, to ensure a sustainable water supply and reduce the risk of fire for the people of Yuba County.

– Yuba Water Agency

“Many forests in the North Yuba River watershed are critically unhealthy, overcrowded with small trees and brush,” said Eli Ilano, Tahoe National Forest supervisor. “Unhealthy forests are at a greater risk of high-severity wildfire due to fire suppression and historic timber harvesting practices, a risk that is exacerbated by a changing climate.”

The North Yuba River watershed runs through multiple Northern California counties and two national forests, from Yuba Pass to New Bullards Bar Reservoir. The area includes thousands of acres of forest habitat, is an important source of water for downstream users, supports high biodiversity, is home to many rural communities, and offers excellent opportunities for recreation.

“We’re loving our forests to death,” said Willie Whittlesey, assistant general manager of Yuba Water Agency. “A ‘hands-off’ approach to forest management is no longer an option now that our communities, infrastructure and water supply are at significant risk. To make a meaningful impact in this massive effort, it’s going to take all of us who care about the watershed coming together.”

Forests once characterized by large, widely-spaced trees and beneficial low-to-moderate severity fires are now overrun with vegetation that is not fire-resilient. This has increased the risk of destructive wildfire causing significant damage to local communities, entire ecosystems, and watershed health.

Projects to restore resilience to the North Yuba River watershed include clearing underbrush, thinning smaller trees, managed burning, reforestation, and meadow restoration, among other efforts. In addition, traditional ecological knowledge from the local Nisenan people will be incorporated into planning and design.

“We are planning ecological forest management projects using the best available science,” said Rachel Hutchinson, river science director for South Yuba River Citizens League. “It’s important to all of us that we strike that balance between the desperate need to restore the forest’s resilience to wildfire and the need to preserve and protect vulnerable species and cultural artifacts.”

“This public-private partnership holds promise as a model to restore the forests of the Sierra at a landscape scale,” said David Edelson, forest program director of The Nature Conservancy. “By using the latest science, innovative planning and new funding approaches, together we can accelerate the restoration of our forests while maintaining the environmental safeguards and community input that are central to success.”

This effort is expected to take up to 20 years to complete, with the highest priority given to at-risk communities, emergency response, evacuation access routes, forests of critical ecological importance, and areas that have the potential to stop a wildfire from spreading.

While planning efforts for the larger North Yuba River watershed are just beginning, the 14,500-acre Yuba Project is already underway, serving as a pilot for the larger-scale North Yuba River watershed restoration effort. The Yuba Project is benefitting from a new financing tool called the Forest Resilience Bond, a public-private partnership that accelerates the pace and scale of forest restoration through investment from private capital sources, including foundations, impact investors, and insurance companies.

“Investor demand for this first-of-its-kind private investment to support public land management greatly outpaced supply. Investors are eager to finance future, larger projects,” said Zach Knight, managing partner of Blue Forest Conservation, the lead developer of the Forest Resilience Bond. “The North Yuba Forest Partnership plans to use the FRB model and other innovative approaches to finance planned work in the North Yuba River watershed.”

To learn more, visit the partnership website at yubaforests.org.

Source: Yuba Water Agency