

Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project

Thursday, November 12, 2020

1:00-4:00pm

1. Fun Fact Five: Concept roll-out Janet Hatfield

The Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project (ESCCRP) kick-off meeting started with a 5-minute introductory topic called the Fun Fact Five. The idea is to use the first 5 minutes of every meeting to discuss a relevant topic to increase the knowledge and understanding of the group while we wait for all stakeholder to join. This alleviates the often awkward wasted time in the first few minutes of virtual meetings and ensures key stakeholder don't miss project specific updates.

In this first edition, the topic was the East Troublesome Creek Fire (ETCF) in Colorado. It was chosen because of the similarities it shared to the Creek Fire that was going on in our backyards; high elevation, late season, wind driven, low humidity, forest with excessive beetle mortality, and significant rock barrier (continental divide and Sierra Crest).

While it was surprising to most fire managers that the ETCF was able to jump the continental divide, the silver lining was that effective fuels management treatments significantly slowed the fire. This allowed firefighters to respond with tactical options, which enabled them to deflect the fire away from a community living in wildland urban interface (WUI). To surmise, this shows the efficacy of fuels treatments for WUI communities.

2. Welcome & Introductions

Meeting Overview – Janet Hatfield

In the second section of the meeting, the facilitator and project manager, Janet Hatfield of Plumas Corporation introduced herself and gave an outline of the meeting with background information about the project.

The goal of the project is to build resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and provide for safe and effective fire responses. ESCCRP, also known as the "Donut," sets forth a plan for ecological restoration management on 55,000 acres around the town of Mammoth Lakes. The aim of the meeting was to set the stage for the project, outline upcoming project tasks and timelines, provide a general synopsis of the funding challenge that lay ahead as well as hear from stakeholders about their concerns, organizational priorities and what they think they may bring to this collaborative. An emphasis was placed on active stakeholder participation in this effort to realize the benefits of this project in a timely manner. Projects of this scale rely on strong partnerships in order to succeed.

Intro – Lesley Yen, new INF Forest Supervisor

We are fortunate to have Lesley back as she is familiar with the Inyo NF having worked here from 2010-2014. Lesley also has experience working on fire-prone forests that have WUI communities and understands the value of doing fuels reduction treatments to protect communities from fires.

Furthermore, she talked about the importance of implementing this project and believes it is a well-thought-out project with a strong group of people making it happen and looks forward to supporting the process.

3. Panel Discussion: Setting the Stage for Ecological Forest Restoration

The Panel Discussion section featured five presentations by local and regional experts, which included forest planners, land managers, scientists, and operational officials. Each presentation discussed various topics pertaining to the significance of the project. Summaries were provided for presenters who did not use slide presentations for their segment of the discussion. Otherwise, presentations are available for review at <https://www.eswildfirealliance.org/meeting-agendas-summaries-action-it>

a. Project Genesis & Goals- Nathan Sill

b. 21st Century Fire Management -Taro Pusina/Jeff Hinson

Taro and Jeff's jobs as INF Fire Mangers are to protect WUI communities, natural, cultural, and recreational values at risk from catastrophic wildfires. Taro believes there needs to be an aggressive four-pronged approach to protect our WUIs; 1) aggressive mechanical fuel reduction, 2) follow the mechanical treatments with low to moderate intensity prescribed fire, 3) follow the mechanical and prescribed fire treatments with unplanned lightning strike management efforts, 4) continually educate stakeholders about fire.

As an Operations Section Chief on a California based Incident Management Team, Jeff explained that fuel breaks, prescribed burning, and managed fires are a huge benefit to firefighting efforts.

He further explained that whenever he goes to a fire, the first thing that he does is requests fire history and fuels project maps that have been completed in the fire area. He then bases future operational decisions on that history and looks to create an anchor point from which to begin suppression actions. Fuels treatments do not stop a fire, but they do reduce the intensity, which allows firefighters to stay engaged with the fire rather than having to back off.

c. Forests in Flux: Are Sierra Nevada Forests Primed for Catastrophic Change? - Marc Meyer

d. Ecosystem Services at Risk: The Environmental Cost of High Severity Fire – Malcolm North

e. INF Land Management Plan Alignment- Erin Noesser

Erin explained that the ESCCRP perfectly aligns with the Land Management Plan for the Inyo National Forest. What the Land Management Plan does is use the best-available science to identify desired conditions and goals which lead land managers towards the management activities that should be considered. The Plan also provides suitability standards to help constrain projects and activities to ensure projects are moving towards desired conditions and mitigate undesirable effects. There are 400 desired conditions and goals within the Plan, 80 overlap with the ESCCR project.

4. Q & A- From chat box

The following questions were posed during the Q & A section:

Q- Erin can you speak to the wildfire management zones? This is a shift from other forest plans that will direct projects.

There are four strategic wildfire management zones; community wildfire protection zone, general wildfire protection zone, wildfire maintenance zone, and wildfire restoration zone. They are mapped out for the entire forest and each zone has specific desired conditions, goals, standards, and guidelines for how to treat fire. After the forest is restored through various treatment activities, the goal is to allow fires to naturally work within the forest landscape increasingly over time

Q- To what extent will it be possible to use hand treatments in roadless areas using local volunteers and trail crews rather than heavy mechanical treatments?

Janet - Treatment in the Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA) is going to be a big conversation in the planning process. Over 10,000 project acres are in the IRA. There is movement towards hand crews or wilderness fuels modules to perform the treatments in these sensitive areas and it is an interesting tool that should be explored. How that is done is may be by building local capacity to implement work.

Nathan - Open to hand treatment in areas that are of concern but are leaning heavily on mechanical treatments because of the volume of work that needs to get done. There is a ton of material that needs to be removed from the site. This poses a significant challenge to hand treatments to meet the goals and objectives of the project.

Q- To what extent will you be considering, planning for and integrating recreation infrastructure (trails, trailheads, dispersed camping, backcountry ski zones) restoration/enhancement in project planning?

Nathan - This project is designed for forest restoration management and not intended to expand recreation infrastructure in the NEPA analysis. However, there will be consideration for future recreation opportunities through this project.

Q-There have been many questions from initial outreach efforts with regard to the need to treat in wilderness? Curious to hear how the panelists would answer that?

A- Opted to not propose any treatments in wilderness areas for this project. Mechanical treatments at lower elevations allow fires in the wilderness areas to burn by providing barriers to protect communities and other high value assets.

Minimum requirement analysis would be required to conduct treatment in the wilderness. Other mechanisms to treat these areas is by managing lightning fires if the fire is beneficial to the landscapes and no culture or natural assets are in the area. The INF does allow for multiple objective fire management depending on the goals and how the fire is responding.

There are science publications on this question about managing these wildfires for multiple resource objectives. It was found there are strong benefits for these fires when they were successfully managed in both Park Service and Wilderness. Unplanned ignition when managed for multiple resource objectives burned very similarly to the natural range of variability in terms of their fire effects and improve biodiversity and resilience of those stands.

5. Regional Fire and Forest Capacity Program-East Subregion: Program Update- Holly Alpert

Holly, an independent contractor for the Eastern California Water Association (ECWA) gave an update about the Regional Fire and Forest Capacity Program that she is managing. It is a block grant given to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Funds were then shuttled to local non-profit that represent different subregions of the Sierra Nevada. Holly is running the east-subregion grant through the ECWA, which encompasses Alpine, Mono, and a good portion of Inyo County.

There are three main components to this program; 1) increase capacity building to do forest (ecosystem) health and fire mitigation projects, 2) collaboration, which is being developed by building a stakeholder group to discuss these issues at a regional level and think about where the priorities are and where we want our resources to go, and 3) project development. Project needs are being identified alongside developing these projects to eventually get funded. If you would like to learn more about this program, please visit <https://www.eswildfirealliance.org/> the official website of the program.

6. Wildfire Mitigation & Adaptation Strategy Plan Alignment & SNC Scope of Work- Janet Hatfield

Janet laid out the work that is to take place for the ESCCRP and began with a reminder of how many plans have set us up for this level of work, citing that 73% of the presidentially declared state emergencies in the state of California have been caused by wildfires since 1954. The collective aim of many of these plans is to protect human life and property, establish the workforce to make that possible, highlight the increasing risk from fire within the Western US and California and to clearly emphasize the root cause of this trajectory is largely due to removal of fire from fire dependent ecosystems and the need for change. The plans further recognize the need to restore fire back into the landscape in order to and maintain ecologically resilient landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and provide for a safe and effective wildfire response when fires do occur.

In Summer of 2020, a [Memorandum Of Understanding](#) (MOU) between CA and Region 5 was signed to help return fire regimes to landscapes. This agreement has 6 actions and 9 goals delineated. The ESCCRP project literally checks every box from that MOU.

ESCCRP-Stakeholder tasks- Sierra Nevada Conservancy Deliverables 2021.

1. Refine Project Boundary
2. Refine Project Goals & Objectives
3. Perform Needs Assessment
4. Develop Proposed Actions
5. Develop RFP for Environmental Services, which will be necessary to initiate the next phase of the planning process (NEPA)

At the end of next year, proposed actions for 55,000 acres of INF Lands will be determined, which entails exactly what the treatment prescriptions will look like on every piece of ground in the project area. Also, Request for Proposal for Environmental Services will be drafted to do survey work to inform the NEPA document. After what was an active and intense fire season, the INF budget is too far stretched to conduct these surveys using INF Staff.

The Needs Assessment will be the most complex for the collaborative. Identifying all the focal areas and qualifications of each of these teams will have to be further defined. One area that is very important is the need for public education across the range. A comprehensive understanding of why this project is being implemented is essential to the success of the project.



All these focus areas will need the attention of dedicated stakeholders to help bring this project to fruition. The Operations team oversees the development and management the proposed actions and the Research and Monitoring team ensures the goals set out are met and that ecosystem services are quantified.

The transparent boxes have funding and the biomass box has pending funding proposal. The hope for the economic development team is to foster local businesses to expand their capability to help implement the work. The final box is there to add focal areas that stakeholders believe needs to be further assessed. Work plans will need to be delineated for each of these focal area groups with the tasks identified, assigned budget figures, and a schedule for implementation of those tasks. All these focal areas combined will help to inform comprehensive project needs.

A timeline for the 2021 calendar was outlined with proposed timelines and targets for deliverables. Janet emphasized that the current funding award from the SNC expires in Spring of 2022 and a priority over the coming year will be to secure additional planning funds as well as implementation funds for high priority NEPA ready acres within the project boundary (Reds Meadow). The current funding outlook is not very encouraging at present but we will remain diligent in seeking new and creative funding mechanisms for this project.

A brief slide outlining the fundraising work that lay ahead was presented and framed using a mountain climbing perspective of Mt. Whitney to help stakeholder conceptualize the work that lay ahead, and where we are in that process. The bottom line being that we are at the very beginning of a long journey that will require a significant effort in order to succeed.

7. Project Boundary Overview- Intro to Online GIS Boundary Tool- Janet Hatfield

Janet provides a brief overview of an online mapping tool developed to facilitate the project boundary refinement discussion (Task 1). There are a lot of different layers to investigate to get more familiar with the project boundary. The map is interactive, and you can learn more about each data layer by clicking

on the map. Further summaries of each dataset can be viewed on the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance website project page. (link below)

This is a tool, not an end all be all. Just another tool in the toolbox to facilitate stakeholder familiarity with the proposed project boundary as we enter revision discussions.

If you have any technical issues, or need assistance, please contact Janet.

Call to Action: Due Date: Dec. 31, 2020. Using the Project Boundary Assessment Tool explore the proposed project area and consider any additions or omissions you think help strengthen the project. Use project boundary suggested revision form provided with meeting follow up.

Online mapping tool and boundary revision requests form are available at:
<https://www.eswildfirealliance.org/meeting-agendas-summaries-action-it>

8. Breakout rooms discussion-

a. Stakeholder Introductions

During the breakout room section, the main meeting group was split into five different rooms to allow stakeholders to introduce themselves and give feedback, comments, or ask questions. There were 20 different organizations present and the following three questions were posed:

- i. What are your organizations main interests in the project?
- ii. What are your primary concerns about the project?
- iii. What do you think your organization brings to this collaborative?

Out of these breakout discussions, a lot of information was shared. Here is a condensed version of the conversations that took place:

There was general enthusiasm around the development of the project and a sense of relief for the town of Mammoth Lakes. Biomass was a topic of excitement but with concern about how it would be removed and processed. Another topic that was widely discussed is the potential impacts (pros and cons) this project could have on the recreation economy. Stakeholder also voiced their concerns about how sensitive natural resources would be evaluated and protected. There was great interest about utilizing the project process as a mean to conduct research to better understand the landscape and improve future management planning.

Finally, various stakeholders volunteered their services and expertise to help conduct research, support outreach campaigns, assist with administrative tasks, and aid with the development of the project as it evolves.

9. Meeting Closure and Next Steps- Janet Hatfield

a. Identify 2021 Meeting Schedule Preferences

Zoom Poll launched for meeting preferences: It was identified that longer monthly Thursday afternoon meetings would be best for the majority of stakeholders.

Zoom Poll launched to decide if Fun Fact 5 should continue: Majority agreed it was valuable and provided input on topics of highest interest.

Closing remarks; The price of inaction is a far too high of a price to pay. The significance of the opportunity that lays in front of us cannot be overstated. This project will bring environmental, economic, and social benefits to the region. Furthermore, for this project to be successful we are going to have to think outside of the box and pursue innovation solutions to move the project forward. The solutions we devise will help to tell our regional story and can be used to build support for the project from the public and funders alike. We are competing against other very important projects across California so we need to create the most compelling story we can. The ESCCRP offers an opportunity to tell a story of how a community came together, listened to the experts, saw the signs, and at a grassroots level made real and meaningful change.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about any aspects of the project, please do not hesitate to contact Janet.