

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

Location: Mono County Civic Center, Mammoth Lakes and Zoom

Host: Laura Beardsley (Whitebark Institute Executive Director)

Facilitator: Stacy Corless (Consultant for Whitebark Institute)

Co-facilitators: Wendy Grasseschi (Mono County Wildfire Coordinator), Kristen Pfeiler (Inyo County Wildfire Coordinator)

Whitebark Institute Staff: Janet Hatfield, Claire Galaway, Melissa Boyd, Crystal Medhurst, Jessie Odell, Carl Rumpp, Heidi Porras, Annie Crowley

Attendees: Over 40 individuals representing more than 20 agencies and organizations

- **Agencies and organizations represented:** Alpine County, Inyo County, Mono County, Town of Mammoth Lakes, Eastern Sierra Council of Governments, Big Pine Paiute Tribe, Inyo National Forest, Bureau of Land Management Bishop Field Office, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Sierra Nevada Conservancy, City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Mammoth Lakes Fire Protection District, Independence Fire Safe Council, Wheeler Crest Fire Safe Council, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of California Irvine, Southern California Edison, Alpine Watershed Group, Eastern Sierra Land Trust, Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation

Brief Summary: Participants received an overview of the history of the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance (ESWA), and the connection and relationship to state goals and programs for wildfire resilience, hearing from state agency representatives. It was clarified that Whitebark Institute, as the recipient of state Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP) funding, is the convener for ESWA, and that the organization is committed to furthering ESWA's work. The focus then shifted to look at regional successes in building wildfire resilience, with an increase in funding, coordination and project planning. Finally, participants engaged in an exercise to determine what the biggest challenges are for building a wildfire collaborative and landscape-scale resilience, specifically around governance/administrative capacity, project planning and funding, and communication. The group found consensus in the value a regional wildfire collaborative and continuing to build the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance in order to address the identified challenges.

Meeting Materials:

[Agenda](#)

[Presentation](#)

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

Welcome/Meeting Goals/Agreements

Laura Beardsley, Executive Director, welcomed the group on behalf of Whitebark Institute. Whitebark serves as meeting host and ESWA coordinator, supported by Inyo/Mono County Wildlife Coordinators.

Meeting goals:

- Reignite engagement and collaborative direction of partners working towards regional wildfire resilience.
- Engage new participants.
- Re-affirm the need and benefit of having a collaborative.
- First in-person meeting of the ESWA.
- Learn from state and regional leaders.
- Understand next steps.

Meeting Agreements

- State your name when speaking
- Respect hybrid format
- Treat people with respect
- All ideas are valuable
- Actively participate
- Be willing to reach consensus
- Avoid/explain acronyms

What is ESWA? *(Laura Beardsley, Stacy Corless)*

- ESWA was born out of a capacity-building grant from Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) and is now managed by Whitebark Institute through continued funding from SNC's Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP)
- The alliance formed in 2021 between 3 Eastern Sierra counties, federal, state, and local agencies, non-profits, tribes, and
- Also in 2021 California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force published an Action Plan that identified the need for regionally focused programs and funding. Legislation to implement the plan created and directed funding to the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program, or RFFCP (Department of Conservation), and the County Wildfire Coordinators program (CAL FIRE)
- Two Regional Reports were produced as part of the first grant: RFFCP Capacity Assessment in 2020 and Eastern Sierra Nevada Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program Subregional Plan (produced with Whitebark) in 2022. The reports provide useful metrics to measure progress.

ESWA Mission and Goals Poll

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

About half the meeting participants have been involved with ESWA in the past. Most poll respondents think the current mission is good, but could use some tweaking. Goals seem

Mission: To prevent catastrophic wildfires by improving ecosystem health and community resiliency through collaboration and capacity-increasing programs.

Goals: Increase the pace and scale of projects, enhance communication, build capacity, and act as a repository for resources and information.

Mentimeter Poll Results

- Have you participated in ESWA before? Yes: 13, No: 7, Unsure: 4
- Does the mission seem right to you? Yes: 36%, Yes, with some adjustment: 60%, Sort of: 4%, No: 0%
- Do the ESWA goals seem right to you? Yes: Many (#?), No: 1, Unsure: 5

ESWA and State Context

ESWA and many wildfire projects in the region are funded through state grants. In 2021, California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force and Action Plan identified the need for regionally-focused programs and funding across multiple state agencies and in partnership with Tribal, federal and local governments. Significant state investments started to be made to implement the action plan, including the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program, a California Natural Resources Agency program administered by the Department of Conservation. RFFCP is part of [California Climate Investments](#), a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment—particularly in disadvantaged communities. Guest speakers from the California Natural Resources Agency and state agencies within CNRA provided context for how ESWA aligns with state wildfire resilience goals.

Keali'i Bright, Undersecretary, California Natural Resources Agency: Statewide Perspective

- The need to address the growing wildfire crisis was first recognized in 2018-2019, leading to the development of the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program (RFFCP), which emphasized regional coordination and local leadership.
- The RFFCP splits California into four regions and aims to ensure equitable distribution of resources to address wildfire risks.
- The Sierra Nevada Conservancy manages RFFCP for the Sierra region, and supports regional block grantees with resources, technical assistance, and funding.
- Highlighted the importance of sustained effort and participation from local partners, especially in light of fluctuating funding cycles.

Brian Newman-Lindsay (RFFCP Program Manager, California Department of Conservation)

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

- RFFCP's emphasis is on developing long-term, sustainable projects that can weather funding ebbs and flows. Regional block grantees administer funds and implement projects.
- The SNC is a key resource for identifying needs, providing technical assistance, and supporting local wildfire resilience efforts.
- SNC's role includes connecting stakeholders, providing planning and peer-learning opportunities, and helping to ensure accountability for projects.

Hannah Page (Regional Manager, California Department of Conservation)

- Page is the grant manager at the Department of Conservation for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and Tahoe Conservancy. She was immediately tasked with learning about ESWA and Whitebark Institute and strongly supports the work.

Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC): Jennifer Hughes (Capacity Building Coordinator, Grant Manager); Waylon Coats (Tribal Liaison, Manages Tribal Grants)

- SNC supports planning and prioritization but focus is on partnership development and capacity building.
- Recap of the first two rounds of RFFCP funding through SNC: Round one = \$1.9 million to "leadership organizations" to build on existing strengths in subregions (ESWA is in East subregion), create capacity for collaborative planning and project prioritization; Round two = \$7.7 million
- Outcomes so far: \$217 million in additional funding leveraged from rounds one and two capacity building efforts
- Fellowship opportunities increased capacity of numerous organizations and led to full-time positions.
- SNC also provides technical assistance through RFFCP:
 - Grant writing workshops, open to all state agencies, NGOs, tribes.
 - Tribal grant writing workshops.
 - Tribal consultations for implementation projects and planning.
 - Strategic planning, legal/financial consulting, organizational development workshops.
 - Do not need to be a sub-grantee to attend workshops; open to those who live/work in service area.
 - Supported 38 workshops/trainings to 562 participants in 2023 and more workshops are incoming for 2025.
- **Tribal Engagement and RFFCP:**
 - Cultural monitoring workshops and connect with agencies/partners with whom they will work. Example: cultural monitoring for fuels reduction in culturally

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

sensitive sites, ground disturbance; cultural monitoring for mountain biking trail development in Truckee/Tahoe.

- Collaborate with two Eastside tribes: Bishop Paiute, Mono Lake Kootzaduka'a
- AB2551 Tribal Partnerships: 2 projects (Shasta Pit River- fuel loading, watershed health; fuel break + Modoc fuel break).
 - Assisted with Maidu with grant management to get the project moving, now they have leveraged a lot of funding and are making great progress.

Big Picture: Round 3 Goals for RFFCP

- Capacity to engage in landscape scale activities or community protection projects.
- Each area has a pipeline of priority projects.
- Pilot program to build tribal capacity.
- Complete Regional Priority Plan.
- Tribal Capacity Building Program: 12 tribes. New program for the state at this scale, pilot program. SNC is always available to help with tribal facilitation. Two Eastside tribes received grants for this program: Bishop Paiute, Mono Lake Kootzaduka'a

Questions

- Related to strategies to increase tribal engagement, consultation and tribal monitoring. Does SNC have funding for tribes to help with their involvement in Forest Service-related projects?
 - **Waylon Coats:** Add tribal engagement into grant applications that will cover tribe's time. If you know you are going to work in an area with cultural significance, increase tribal engagement. The tribe would like to monitor on the ground. SNC added a line item in grant applications for tribal monitoring, consultation, tribal crew to do work on the ground. Best to involve tribes in the planning phase, but if not possible for them, when conducting CEQA/NEPA, get tribes involved during surveying for botany, resources.
- At what point will published strategies coming from the task force be integrated into the grant programs? SNC timeline.
 - **Kaeli'i:** Good question—it's a work in progress as strategies continue to be developed through the task force.

Activity: Gallery of Success

In this activity, meeting participants were prompted to review and reflect on regional wildfire resilience successes listed on flipchart pages posted on the walls (and on Zoom, participants were asked to review photos of the flipchart pages), and add to the list, share thoughts. Below are transcriptions from the flipchart pages (including added emphases from participants), including notes from Zoom.

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

Program and Project Successes: Regional capacity building to accelerate pace and scale in Inyo and Mono Co -!; Community resilience!; My neighborhood needs to engage - do others feel the same? Strong neighborhoods are well-connected, they know and look out for each other, Robin, Wheeler Crest Firesafe Council; Environmental Compliance (Sierra Pines to Lone Pine); Watershed monitoring report in Alpine County; Environmental Capacity; planning on Tribal Lands; Support for project mgt: tech assistance; integration of rec economy; NO SILOS; regional capacity building to increase pace and scale of INYO/MONO projects

ESCCRP: Signed decision!; integration of recreation economy; \$28,326,595 in grants secured to date (heart); workforce development; over 5,000 acres implemented in last three years—thinning and burning, proof of concept! (heart); \$12 million in funding for priority acre treatments in 2025 (heart); capacity for future projects; biomass planning grant – keep going (smiley face); interagency partnership—FIGHT THE SILOS! (smiley face)

Funding Successes: \$10,733,173 CAL FIRE: Whitebark Institute, Bishop Paiute Tribe, Mammoth Lakes Fire and more!; \$489,100 CA Fire Safe Council/Wildfire Coordinator Grants; Millions leveraged for Eastern Sierra Region; NRCS funding for three fuels projects; try to avoid hiring outside consultants; Southern California Edison funding

Fuels Treatments: Total projects: 222 (heart): USFS – 7,648 acres, BLM—4,171 acres, Caltrans—2,243 acres; CDFW—615 acres; CAL FIRE—1,760 acres; [Wildlife Conservation Board] WCB—181 acres; NPS—91 acres; DWP—assist w/fuels reduction in Inyo/Mono

Attendee-Generated Prior Successes

- Enhanced dispersed camping management.
- Tribal fuelwood donation collaboration.
- ESCCRP, regional capacity building to enhance pace/scale of Inyo/Mono resiliency projects.
- SCE electrical structure work, vegetation management match, SCE funding.

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

Regional Successes: Kristen Pfeiler & Wendy Grasseschi (Inyo and Mono County Wildfire Coordinators)

- Highlighted the importance of cross-jurisdictional coordination to address regional wildfire challenges at a more efficient pace. Their work aligns with RFFCP guidelines and emphasizes building relationships, enhancing Firewise Communities, and helping agencies collaborate efficiently.
- Emphasized the importance of going into communities to assess needs by talking to the community.
- Firewise Communities: Have grown significantly, with 17 new communities in the last two years. These communities conduct risk assessments and work to implement wildfire mitigation measures.
- Since the start of capacity investments, there has been a 3500% increase in CalFire funding alone.
- Highlighted CA Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force success: interagency project treatment dashboard that pulls together all public information on projects and inputs in maps/dashboards.

Regional Successes: Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project (Janet Hatfield, Whitebark Institute)

- **ESCCRP (Mammoth Donut)** is a direct output from the Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan, which envisioned this project. Made possible with investments from the state following the Creek Fire.
- Partner-driven effort with the purpose to restore forests to historical densities to prepare for reintroduction of fire and future climate conditions.
- SNC funded this project in a separate grant in tandem with the RFCCP effort, intended to address other needs of the region. Recognized the economic importance of Mammoth and the complexity/cost of the project.
- SNC funded two deliverables: 1) Develop proposed action and 2) Allow the community to weigh in on what goals and objectives should be and articulate the needs assessment.
- Needs assessment outside of NEPA, foundational components needed to support the project.
- The intent is to use this project as a capacity catalyst and the **CDFW Accelerator Grant** to build local environmental planning capacity. Most impactful contribution to the region.
- Highlights of progress so far include helping facilitate the development of the **Smokedancers Bishop Paiute Tribal Forestry Crew**, who have been working in Reds Meadow and are now at the Inyo Craters. Work is year-round, and the hope is the group continues to grow.

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

- Increase in funding: \$12M from the state to begin implementing immediately to start next year.

Challenges

While the region has many successes to reflect on and celebrate, there are also many common and shared challenges.

Poll: Name Your Challenge

Participants were asked to enter challenges in mentimeter. Challenges named include: Funding (sustainable funding), Capacity (administrative, on-the-ground), communications (regional communications), horizontal integration, project development, community participation, resource sharing, contractors, NEPA, risk aversion, volunteers/volunteer burnout, economic sustainability, geography, sustained commitment.

Challenges Round Robin Exercise

In this activity, in-person participants were divided into three groups. Each group spent about 10 minutes in a facilitated discussion of three topics: project planning and funding; communication; governance structure and capacity. In-person participants rotated between topics, with each group adding to the responses already listed. Zoom participants answered questions and gave feedback on all three topics as a group. Bullets represent the three rounds and Zoom participants' answers to prompts/questions.

Project Planning and Funding

What are the challenges of project planning at a regional scale?

- Multiple stakeholders and meaningful engagement
- Collaboration to build regional capacity rather than compete for funding, resources
- Project continuity
- Differing priorities – if everything is a priority than nothing is a priority; Need consensus, leadership support for prioritization across political boundaries and organizations
- Limited staffing
- Legacy of mistrust of agencies
- Dynamic environment
- Neglect of site level detail

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

- Project ownership and management: which agency/entity handles grant procurement, managing/subcontracting grant components, liability (example of tool lending library and having individual homeowners involved)

What are the benefits?

- Same ecosystem
- Local knowledge
- Resource sharing
- Coordinated planning
- Multi-benefit
- More effective
- reduce duplication
- Increase capacity
- Building partnerships
- Community engagement

How do we develop a regional list of multijurisdictional projects?

- Build on existing efforts
- Use science and data
- Risk map, modeling
- Early collaboration
- Know priorities
- Financial analysis
- Lock everyone in a room and don't let them out until they are done

How do we prioritize projects?

- Increase collaboration to build regional capacity rather than compete for funding, resources
- Focus on a smaller number of projects at one time; create focus-tiered system
- Persistence
- Beneficiary investments
- Asking/involving stakeholders (be in the same room, standing around real maps)
- Possible prioritization factors: agency mandates, Buy in (value), meets funding priorities, funding match priorities/reciprocity, carbon emissions, wildlife impacts, wildland/urban interface, ongoing project/build on prior effort

Communication

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

What are some regional wildfire resilience communication, outreach and information challenges?

- Fire Safe Councils lack tools for communication with communities; email isn't always effective, mailers are expensive; need support for people communicating with communities
- Communicating to visitors and people passing through
- Getting public's attention: need more education, attention on severity of issue; defensible space and local responsibility
- Project level communications: we are talking HIGH LEVEL and neglecting local
- Need fiscal agent
- Consistent messaging: different priorities and structures
- Communicating what a healthy forest is
- Communications for transitional ecosystems across the region: role of fire and problems differ

What information do you need? What is missing?

- Information about shovel-ready projects for grants/project status—what would it take to get projects to this stage?
- Who is who within fire work—there are lots of players

How can regional communication be improved, both within the Alliance and with the public?

- Resource sharing would be a valuable component to expand upon between counties, agencies, NGO's etc.
- Using existing programs/entities and regional communications tools for communication and information sharing—Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership, Sierra Jobs First, Visitor Connection Package, Sustainable Recreation and Tourism Initiative
- Implement [communication] plans
- Take advantage of the fact that communities are more receptive
- Consider/use different channels of communication
- Public outreach: well thought out regional effort
- Tailored, personal communications
- Leadership courage
- Help your neighbor events
- Incentives

Governance Structure and Capacity

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

Who does what?

- Create an asset map, identifying resources, capacity, funding, abilities, constraints, inventory (eg CEQA, Admin)
- Determine how to leverage members' strengths
- Currently structure is confusing, need to clarify leadership of ESWA: roles, charter, based on \$, not objectives/outcomes
- Need local, neutral organization
- Need for members to wear multiple hats throughout process
- Include visitor perspective
- Don't be duplicative
- Beware of alliance fatigue—there are many collaboratives collaborating
- There is need for a nonprofit for admin capacity, and as vehicle for funding movement
- Collaborative needs to consider and include Tribal perspective
- Include business sector

Are there models we can use?

- SCALE (Sierra Institute's Sierra to California All-Lands Enhancement program)
- Community Forestry Model
- Eastern Sierra Council of Governments Sustainable Recreation and Ecosystem Management Program
- Look statewide for models of workforce training/development programs that address wraparound issues such as housing

What are the biggest capacity issues that the Alliance could address? How would ESWA participation benefit you?

- Reduce gap between project concept, funding and implementation
- "The color of \$" [help obtain/use/manage/understand different funding sources]
- Obtaining block-style grants for capacity building
- Office of grant administration (at a county or Eastern Sierra Council of Governments?)
- Public info/PIO coordination
- Managing agreements/Memoranda of Understanding
- Help organizations know how to plug in/what direction we are going in, clear existing bottleneck of who knows the information and who can do what
- Communicate regional organizations' issues
- Stay relevant
- Coordinate staffing for crews, housing for crews

Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance November 15, 2024 Meeting Summary

- Find more funding to address staffing issues (such as housing, training, building local workforce)

Reflection and Discussion

- Group confirmed consensus on need for a collaborative, willingness to work on how to build it
- Laura confirmed next steps for ESWA: survey, meeting summary and video to come in December along with late January 2025 date for next meeting
- A Tribal forum for ESWA is also a possibility, if Tribes would find a separate forum of interest/value
- Question regarding about how groups were selected to participate in ESWA.
 - **Answer:** Initial ESWA participants were invited, and other groups working within the wildfire resilience space were included. A survey will assess who else should be included.