

MÁYALA WÁTA RESTORATION PROJECT AT MEEKS MEADOW GRANT

Recommended Action: Adopt Resolution 20-12-04 (Attachment 1) authorizing a grant to the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California (Tribe) for up to \$380,454 to implement the Máyala Wáta Restoration Project at Meeks Meadow (Project) and containing the appropriate California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) determination.

Executive Summary: The Tribe seeks a grant from the California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy) to implement the Project. The Tribe will restore approximately 300 acres of meadow habitat at Meeks Meadow (also known as Máyala Wáta, the Washoe name for Meeks Creek), in coordination with the USDA Forest Service (USDA FS) Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU). This will involve removing conifers, performing culturally guided prescribed burning, conducting post-fire revegetation and restoration, and completing project effectiveness monitoring. By implementing the project, the Tribe will restore an important cultural site within its ancestral lands, reduce wildfire risk, improve species diversity, foster resilience to climate change impacts, and increase Tribal capacity to implement culturally guided restoration activities. The recommended action advances Governor Gavin Newsom's Statement of Administration Policy on Native American Ancestral Lands by granting state funds to assist California Native Americans with protecting and managing natural lands within their ancestral territories. The grant also supports the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP), Lake Tahoe West Landscape Restoration Strategy, and the Conservancy's Strategic Plan Goal 1 (Steward Conservancy Lands and Protect Basin Communities from Wildfire), Goal 2 (Restore the Resilience of Basin Forests and Watersheds), and Goal 3 (Provide Public Access and Outdoor Recreation for All Communities).

Location: The Project is located within the USDA FS Meeks Management Area on the western shore of Lake Tahoe in El Dorado County (Attachment 2). The Project is accessed from State Route 89 (SR 89) in Meeks Bay across from the Meeks Bay Resort. The Project area extends 1.3 miles upstream from SR 89 and one quarter-mile on either side of the Meeks Creek channel.

Fiscal Summary: Staff requests authorization to award up to \$380,454 in Proposition 68 funding for the Tribe to implement the Project.

Overview

History

The Tribe has inhabited the Lake Tahoe region for thousands of years and its creation story is inextricably linked with Lake Tahoe and surrounding mountain ranges. Historically, the Tribe managed lands in the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) using periodic burning, pruning, weeding, and other practices to maintain the diversity, vigor, and quality of culturally-desirable plants for food, medicines, game habitat, and basket-making materials. Through many generations, Tribal elders transferred traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of resource allocation and environmental management to other Tribal members.

Meeks Meadow served as a historical summer camp for Washoe people who hunted game, fished, gathered plant materials, and held ceremonies in the meadow and adjacent Meeks Bay area. The Tribe maintained the open character of the meadow by periodically burning it in the fall before Tribal members migrated to lower elevations for the winter. The ecological and cultural function of the Meadow has declined steadily due to European settler appropriation of Tribal lands at Lake Tahoe in the mid-nineteenth century, and subsequent cattle grazing, logging, and fire suppression at Meeks Meadow. Today the unnatural expansion of conifers growing in the meadow and propagation of non-native plant species has increased wildfire risk, dried the meadow, degraded habitat, and reduced cultural values.

Meeks Meadow is located on land owned by the USDA FS. The Tribe and LTBMU have cooperatively managed Meeks Meadow since 1997. In 2019 the Tribe and LTBMU signed a Stewardship Agreement granting the Tribe authority for cultural management of Meeks Meadow and outlining 20 years of restoration goals and funding responsibilities. The Stewardship Agreement provides the legal and financial framework necessary to implement the Project.

In 2016 the Tribe and Conservancy signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU recognizes shared interests in protecting social, biological, and cultural resources at Lake Tahoe, and formalizes coordination practices between the Tribe and Conservancy. The MOU also encourages ongoing coordination efforts between the two governmental entities on projects such as the restoration of Meeks Meadow.

The Conservancy has since provided two grants to the Tribe, consistent with the MOU. The Tribe in 2016 obtained a Conservancy grant to develop a Culturally Significant Vegetation Enhancement and Management Plan, and to complete environmental review and permitting for the Project. The Tribe completed activities under this \$228,530 Proposition 1 planning grant in early 2020. This year the Board also authorized a \$280,000 grant of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds to the Tribe. This grant funded the hauling of woody biomass from the Project site to Tribal headquarters in Gardnerville, Nevada for wintertime firewood for Tribal elders.

Detailed Description of Recommended Action

1. Major Elements and/or Steps of the Recommended Action

The Tribe seeks funding from the Conservancy to begin implementing the Project in early 2021. Conservancy staff recommends that the Board authorize a grant to the Tribe for up to \$380,454 to implement the restoration activities listed below. The previously developed Culturally Significant Vegetation Enhancement and Management Plan will guide Project implementation. The Tribe will carry out the following activities in coordination with the LTBMU (except project monitoring):

- 1) Conifer removal. Tribal members will develop a conifer-removal plan, remove the encroaching conifers using mechanical and hand thinning on approximately 300 acres, and pile and haul the extracted conifers off-site.
- 2) Culturally guided prescribed fire. Following conifer removal, Tribal crews and staff will complete prescribed fire training, help develop the burn plan, and participate in culturally guided prescribed burning.
- 3) Post-fire meadow restoration. Following prescribed burning, Tribal elders, youth, and crews will plant culturally significant vegetation, identify and remove invasive species, and protect culturally significant plants. This activity will transfer TEK from Tribal elders to younger generation Tribal members.
- 4) Project effectiveness monitoring. Tribal crews will monitor the effectiveness of restoration activities. The Tribe expects to see various benefits, including raised groundwater levels, healthier soils, and increased native vegetation. The Tribe will analyze the data collected before and after Project implementation to understand its effect on ecological health, habitat, hydrology, and cultural values.

Upon Board authorization staff will prepare and execute a grant agreement with the Tribe.

2. Overall Context and Benefits

The Tribe will actively manage its ancestral lands in a historically and culturally appropriate manner. They will restore the ecological and cultural functions of the 300-acre meadow, while reducing the potential for catastrophic wildfire and increasing resilience to climate change impacts.

The Tribe and LTBMU will remove conifers to reduce demand for groundwater, thereby increasing groundwater levels and creating a wetter meadow. Higher groundwater benefits native plants, which in turn provide habitat for animal species and cultural value for the Tribe. The wetter meadow and vibrant vegetation will be more stable and resilient to flooding, and will support higher-quality habitat during extended droughts. Conifer removal also reduces wildfire risk by removing fuels that can exacerbate fires.

The Tribe and LTBMU will conduct prescribed burning to eliminate invasive species and reduce wildfire risk by removing flammable ladder fuels. Following prescribed burning, the Tribe will plant culturally desirable, fire-adapted native vegetation to further remove invasive species, support cultural uses, and enhance the meadow ecosystem.

The Project will also build capacity and increase multigenerational learning for Tribal members. Tribal members of all ages and Tribal crews will simultaneously implement the Project, and learn and practice cultural restoration activities at Meeks Meadow. The Tribe will accomplish this through prescribed burning trainings, consultations with elders, activities for youth, and dedicated workdays.

Recent state policies aimed at addressing historical violence, exploitation, and attempted destruction of tribal communities support the restoration of traditional Native American practices and the transfer of TEK to younger generations. These directives include Governor Newsom’s Statement of Administrative Policy on Native American Ancestral Lands, and Executive Orders B-10-11 and N-15-19. The recommended action also advances the goals of Proposition 68, which encourages partnerships with tribal organizations and promotes access for tribal communities.

3. Schedule for the Recommended Action

Staff intends to execute an agreement with the Tribe shortly following authorization. The Tribe will start to implement activities in early 2021 and expects to complete grant work in spring 2024.

Task	Completion Date
Execute Agreement with the Tribe	Winter 2020 – 2021
Implement Conifer Removal	Summer 2021 – Fall 2022
Implement Burn Plan	Summer 2021 – Fall 2023
Implement Post-Fire Meadow Restoration	After Burning – Spring 2024
Perform Project Effectiveness Monitoring	Spring 2021 – Spring 2024

Financing

The proposed funding source is Proposition 68. Staff recommends the budget shown below. Staff may adjust the budget between line items, but total expenditures will not exceed \$380,454.

Task	Amount
Conifer Removal	\$41,000
Culturally Guided Prescribed Fire	\$129,850
Post-Fire Meadow Restoration	\$122,604
Project Effectiveness Monitoring	\$87,000
Total	\$380,454

Authority

Consistency with the Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation

Implementation of the Project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. Specifically, Government Code section 66907.7 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to federally recognized Indian tribes for purposes consistent with its mission.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan

The recommended action supports:

- Goal 1, Strategy E by implementing and developing innovative financial partnerships and interagency agreements that increase the Conservancy and its partners' ability and capacity to manage and restore its lands, maintain its recreational facilities, treat forest fuels, suppress wildfire, and beneficially use prescribed fire.
- Goal 2, Strategy B by advancing multiple-benefit projects that creatively combine restoring and building the resilience of forests and watersheds with water quality protection, green infrastructure, recreation, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Goal 3, Strategy C by working with sister agencies and organizations to fulfill Proposition 68's diversity and inclusion mandates, including outreach, mentorship, partnership, communication and education, and youth engagement and empowerment.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Program Guidelines

The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's Grant Guidelines.

Consistency with External Authorities

The recommended action is consistent with the EIP because it advances EIP project #01.02.01.0069. It also supports several state mandates, including Executive Orders B-10-11 and N-15-19 and Governor Newsom's Statement of Administration Policy on Native American Ancestral Lands. The recommended action is also consistent with the principles of Proposition 68 related to tribes.

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board (LRWQCB), acting as the lead agency, prepared an initial study (IS)/negative declaration (ND) for the Project to comply with CEQA. LRWQCB adopted the ND on February 27, 2019 and filed a notice of determination (NOD) on March 22, 2019.

A copy of the IS/ND (Attachment 3) is available for review on LRWQCB's website at https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/lahontan/docs/mayala_noi_nd.pdf or upon request.

As a responsible agency, the Conservancy must consider the ND prepared by LRWQCB and reach its own conclusions on whether and how to approve the Project. Staff reviewed the ND and believes that the Project is adequately analyzed in this document. Staff determined that the Project would not cause a significant effect on the environment.

Staff recommends the Board review and consider the ND adopted by LRWQCB and make the findings set forth in the attached resolution. If the Board considers and

concurs with the ND and authorizes the grant, staff will file an NOD with the State Clearinghouse pursuant to CEQA guidelines, section 15096 (Attachment 4).

List of Attachments

Attachment 1 – Resolution 20-12-04

Attachment 2 – Project Map

Attachment 3 – LRWQCB CEQA Documents

Attachment 4 – Conservancy's NOD

- Exhibit A – Project Map
- Exhibit B – Filing Fee Receipt

Conservancy Staff Contact

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