

Executive Director's Report

Since the Conservancy Board's last meeting in June, the Caldor Fire ignited on the west slope of El Dorado County. The fire burned more than 220,000 acres and destroyed hundreds of homes. At one point, around the time the fire entered the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) in late August, as many as 50,000 people evacuated their communities.

In a story that captured national attention, firefighters saved Tahoe's south and west shore communities. Through determination, collaboration, and ingenuity not a single home in the Basin was lost. The experience of the firefighters also showed the importance of the years of preparation by Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team (TFFT) partners, which includes the Conservancy. As detailed below, these preparations included advanced planning, thinning forests around neighborhoods to reduce flammable fuels, creating defensible space, and making homes more fire resistant—all of which improved the odds of protecting neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, the Caldor Fire is no outlier. Eight of California's ten largest wildfires in history have burned in the past five years. Climate-driven heat and drought, combined with overgrown forests caused by a century of fire suppression, are making megafires more common. The investments we have made to date are not enough—we must advance our work together to make Tahoe forests and communities more resilient.

The good news is that more investments are coming. The climate and wildfire budget packages passed by the California legislature and signed last month by Governor Gavin Newsom are sending \$41.25 million to Lake Tahoe to restore forests, reduce wildfire risk, and bolster climate resilience. The region will receive an additional \$48 million in funding from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management for work to reduce wildfire risk.

This has been a year of disruption. In addition to continued challenges of the pandemic, the Tamarack and Caldor Fires caused many of our own employees to evacuate. What's remarkable is how much work our employees have completed, nonetheless. Signature projects such as the Upper Truckee Marsh Restoration and the South Tahoe Greenway progressed despite obstacles. The Tahoe Livable Communities program staff met with developers and permitting agencies to advance several affordable and workforce housing projects on Conservancy lands. Forestry staff continued to restore forests and reduce fuels on our lands in the wildland-urban interface, while advancing plans for large landscape restoration. This fall, our staff and crews acted quickly to assess and stabilize Conservancy lots affected by the Caldor fire.

There is much still to be done. We look forward to closing out a successful 2021 and moving ahead in 2022.

Caldor Fire Incident

The Caldor Fire began on August 14 in an area of the El Dorado National Forest south of Pollock Pines. Hot, dry winds drove the fire through exceptionally dry forests, causing it to grow rapidly in the following weeks. The fire destroyed hundreds of homes and other structures as it moved up the west slope of El Dorado County towards the Basin, including 440 homes in the hard-hit community of Grizzly Flats. By August 29, the fire had grown to more than 150,000 acres as it neared the rim of the Basin. That day, officials began evacuating the first neighborhoods in the Basin. By the time evacuations peaked in the following days, as many as 50,000 people had evacuated their homes, as the fire threatened 32,000 structures.

As the Caldor Fire descended upon the south shore communities of Christmas Valley and Meyers, firefighters managed to protect the neighborhoods. In the days and weeks that followed, firefighters steered the fire around communities, slowed its growth, and increased its containment. In early September, officials downgraded some evacuation orders within the Basin to evacuation warnings and residents began returning to their homes. The last of the evacuation warnings ended in mid-September. As of October 21, the fire is fully contained.



Photo by AP/Samuel Metz

As the fire came under control, details emerged about factors that contributed to the defense of South Lake Tahoe and the surrounding communities:

1. Thousands of firefighters—up to 4,500 personnel at the peak of firefighting—made an heroic effort using innovative tactics and technologies to defend the communities of Christmas Valley and Meyers as the fire approached. Their efforts were more efficient thanks to wildfire pre-attack plans that Tahoe fire and law enforcement agencies had prepared in recent years with the TFFT.
2. Basin land managers had thinned the forest surrounding south shore neighborhoods. The fire behavior changed as flames entered areas where flammable forest fuels had been reduced, allowing firefighters to stand their ground and directly attack the blaze.
3. Many residents had hardened their homes to wildfire and managed their properties appropriately for defensible space. This preparation followed years of extensive outreach by the Tahoe Network of Fire Adapted Communities, led by the Tahoe Resource Conservation District (Tahoe RCD) and local fire agencies.
4. Public safety officials issued evacuation orders early. These evacuations followed years of community outreach about evacuation planning. Early evacuations allowed firefighters to focus on fighting the fire once it reached the neighborhoods.



Post-Fire Assessment and Recovery

In September, the Incident Management Team for the Caldor Fire began post-fire “suppression repair.” Suppression repair consists of immediate actions taken to repair

damages and minimize potential soil erosion and impacts resulting from fire suppression activities. This includes repairing the miles of containment lines that dozers and hand crews had built for fire suppression.

As Conservancy operations resumed, staff began assessing the damage to Conservancy lands from the fire and fire suppression efforts. Seasonal forestry aides assessed 233 Conservancy parcels that were within the fire perimeter, had been crossed by containment lines, or were located within 300 feet of these activities. Aides identified 83 properties requiring further assessment. A team of experts from the Conservancy's Community Forestry, Landscape Forestry, Land Management, and Watershed programs assessed the 83 parcels and identified 31 that needed recovery work or soil stabilization. Of these properties, most of the impacts to be addressed resulted from fire suppression control lines, as would be expected, and not directly from the fire itself.



The Conservancy's Land Management staff and the Tahoe RCD's restoration crew have completed initial work to help these affected parcels recover—including stabilizing disturbed soil, installing erosion-control barriers, mulching, and seeding—and will continue to adaptively manage those properties in the months and years to come.



Long-term recovery from the Caldor Fire will take years. The Conservancy will continue to collaborate with its TFFT partners to support the regional recovery effort.

Budget and Accounting

Wildfire Protection and Climate Resilience Funding

In April, Governor Gavin Newsom signed a \$536 million early action funding plan to accelerate wildfire prevention projects statewide. The early action funding included \$1 million for the Conservancy to reduce hazardous fuels on its open-space lots, implement high-priority forest management projects on its lands in the wildland-urban interface, and use prescribed fire to restore landscape resilience. The Conservancy put these funds to immediate use this past field season, preparing 794 acres for future treatment, thinning 190 acres, and removing 202 hazard trees. (Disruption by the Tamarack and Caldor fires delayed work on 200 acres of additional planned forest treatments.)

In September, Governor Newsom signed wildfire and climate funding packages that included \$41.25 million for the Conservancy. The wildfire package includes \$36 million for the Conservancy and its partners to restore forests and reduce wildfire risk in the Basin. The Conservancy will invest the funding to treat its own lands and to support partners in the Basin for work that reduces hazardous fuels in the wildland-urban

interface and advances landscape-scale forest restoration. The funds will also support work to help forests in the Basin recover from the Caldor Fire. An additional \$5.25 million in the climate package will fund the Conservancy's work to improve the resilience of the Basin's communities and natural resources to climate change impacts.

In October, the U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management committed over \$40 million for ten hazardous fuels reduction and wildfire prevention projects throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin. The funding package approved by Secretary Deb Haaland includes over \$10 million for the Conservancy to reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland-urban interface. Funding for the projects was generated through the sale of public lands under the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act.

Current Funding Sources

A variety of sources fund the Conservancy's programs, projects, operations, grants, and staff. The Conservancy's base funding consists of state special revenue monies through Environmental License Plate sales, Lake Tahoe License Plate sales, and land management revenue. The Conservancy continues to rely on voter-approved bonds (Propositions 1, 12, 40, 50, 68, and 84) and state and federal grants to bridge the gap between its base funding and the full cost of projects and operations. The Conservancy's funding sources for the 2021-2022 fiscal year includes the significant amount of general fund monies (i.e., \$41.25 million) as noted above that will be spent over three to five fiscal years:

Available Funding

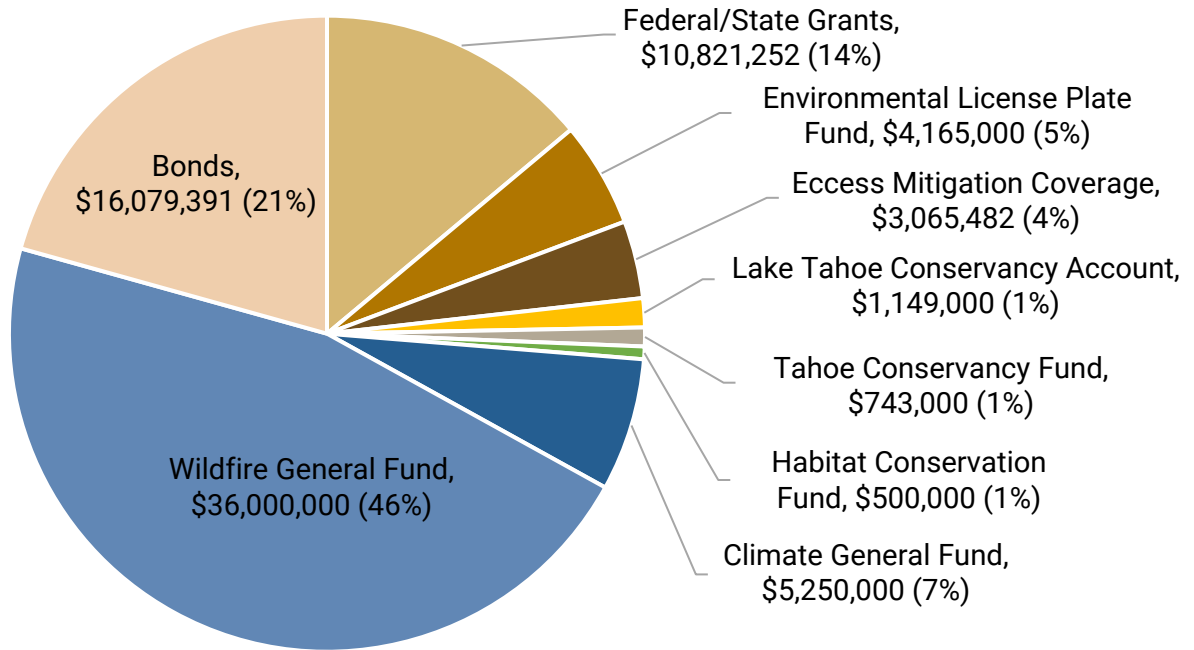


Figure 1: funding sources.