California Tahoe Conservancy
Agenda Item 8
June 18, 2026

WARD CREEK RESTORATION PROJECT

Recommended Action: Adopt Resolution 26-06-05 (Attachment 1) authorizing staff to expend up to $200,000 to complete final design and permitting for the Ward Creek Restoration Project (Project); provide up to $300,000 to the USDA Forest Service, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU) for Project implementation; authorize the LTBMU to construct, monitor, and adaptively manage Project elements on California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy) land; and enter into all necessary agreements to implement the Project.

Executive Summary: The Conservancy and the LTBMU are working together to restore Ward Creek as it crosses Conservancy and federal land. To that end, this authorization will allow Conservancy staff to expend funding for Project design, provide funding to the LTBMU for implementation, and enter into agreements with the LTBMU for funds and access to construct Project elements on Conservancy land.

Conservancy and LTBMU staff have already completed initial Project planning. With the additional funding, Conservancy staff will work with the Department of General Services (DGS) to finalize Project designs and prepare permit applications. The LTMBU will then lead Project implementation.

The Project will address historic impacts from logging and fire suppression along Ward Creek on the west shore of Lake Tahoe. These past land uses have disturbed the Project area, resulting in decreased habitat quality and an oversized and erosive stream channel that no longer rewets the adjacent meadow. The LTMBU will remove encroaching conifers, remove relic roads, and place wood and vegetation in the creek to improve habitat, stabilize streambanks, and rewet the meadow. The Project will increase climate resilience, enhance wildlife habitat and biodiversity, and improve water quality.

The recommended action advances the Conservancy's Strategic Plan goals to restore the resilience of Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) forests and watersheds while utilizing new technologies and innovative strategies. The Project is a part of the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Strategy (Restoration Strategy), a multi-agency effort to restore the resilience of Lake Tahoe's west shore. In addition, the Project supports the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) and the State's Pathways to 30x30 strategy, which calls for conserving at least 30 percent of California's land by 2030.

The Conservancy Executive Director will approve the Project in accordance with the Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects (SERP). The SERP exempts qualifying projects from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) with the concurrence of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). The SERP is a key element of the California Natural Resource Agency's (CNRA) Cutting the Green Tape initiative to accelerate habitat restoration and biodiversity goals.

Location: The Project area is 36 acres including LTBMU- and Conservancy-managed lands, located in Placer County, adjacent to Ward Creek Boulevard, approximately 1.5 miles upstream from State Route 89 (Attachment 2).

Fiscal Summary: Conservancy staff requests authority to expend up to $200,000 in Proposition 4 funding to complete Project design and permit applications, and to provide up to $300,000 of Proposition 4 funding to support Project implementation.

Overview

History

Initiated in 2016, the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership (Lake Tahoe West) includes scientists, land managers, federal and state agencies, and organizations representing business, recreation, and conservation. By pooling resources and collaborating across jurisdictions, Lake Tahoe West is taking an all-lands approach to restoring the resilience of the Basin's west shore to disturbance. In 2019, the Lake Tahoe West team developed a Restoration Strategy, which provides a collaborative framework to restore resilience to 59,000 acres, and includes the Project. To develop the Restoration Strategy, land managers used a science-based approach to consider the current forest and watershed conditions and impairments, and to identify specific restoration actions to achieve long-term and multiple benefit resilience. Coordinating across the landscape under the Restoration Strategy, land management agencies are increasing the pace and scale of restoration actions, including forest thinning, prescribed fire, and meadow, aspen, and stream restoration.

The Ward Creek watershed has a history of grazing, logging, fire suppression, and development. These activities reduced the amount and quality of stream and meadow habitats. Steep slopes and naturally erosive soils are prevalent in the upper watershed, leading Ward Creek to be one of the largest fine sediment producers, on a unit area basis, of all the tributaries flowing into Lake Tahoe. Fine sediment is one of the primary causes in the decline in Lake Tahoe's water clarity. The Restoration Strategy identified the Project as an opportunity to improve sensitive stream and meadow habitat, increase watershed resilience, and capture sediment from hillslope erosion.

The Project area is roughly 36 acres with 4,000 linear feet of stream channel, and is approximately 75 percent federal and 25 percent Conservancy land (Attachment 3).

Logging and grazing in the Project area led to roads and ditches crossing the floodplain that now force flows to remain within the stream channel instead of spreading across the Ward Creek watershed. These historic impacts led to an oversized channel, localized streambank erosion, reduced aquatic habitat quality, drier floodplain conditions, conifer encroachment, and increased risk of wildfire. Two existing recreational trailheads with small parking areas are adjacent to the Project: the Tahoe Rim Trail at the upstream end of the Project with approximately eight parking spots, and the Stanford Rock Trail at the downstream end with approximately 12 parking spots.

Because the Project crosses LTBMU- and Conservancy-managed lands, staff from both agencies have jointly planned the Project. The LTBMU previously provided approximately $400,000 of Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) funding to the Conservancy to plan the Project. This federal funding supported Conservancy staff and a consultant team to complete a feasibility study, an opportunities and constraints report, preliminary Project plans, and environmental studies and documentation.

Detailed Description of Recommended Action

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

Conservancy staff requests authorization to expend up to $200,000 of Proposition 4 funding for DGS to finalize the restoration design and prepare permit applications. The staff will also engage with the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California (Washoe Tribe) and partners, and work with the LTBMU to continue to inform the public about the Project and provide opportunities for community members to engage directly with the staff.

The staff also requests authorization to execute an agreement to provide the LTBMU up to $300,000 of Proposition 4 funding and access to Conservancy land for Project implementation. The LTBMU will lead Project construction and assume responsibilities for the Project. The LTBMU plan to construct the Project in summer 2027, using in-house restoration crews and possibly other resources, such as crews from the Washoe Tribe. LTBMU staff aims to complete most of the Project in one construction season, with adaptive management and monitoring thereafter. The LTBMU will monitor and adaptively manage the Project elements on Conservancy land after construction is complete.

2. Overall Context and Benefits

Restoring Ward Creek will improve aquatic and terrestrial habitat and enhance climate resilience. The LTBMU will remove encroaching conifers across a large portion of the Project area to expand meadow habitat and reduce wildfire risk (Attachment 3). To slow and spread water, the LTBMU will remove relic roads and ditches and construct a variety of wood and vegetation features both along channel banks and on the floodplain. Encouraging flows to spread beyond the creek channel will provide opportunities for water to slow and deposit material, preventing sediment from reaching Lake Tahoe. By implementing the Project, the LTBMU will increase in-stream and meadow habitat complexity, promote biodiversity, and improve water quality. The Project will advance the Restoration Strategy by improving the west shore's resilience against wildfire, drought, and

extreme precipitation events. The LTBMU will maintain access to the Tahoe Rim Trail and Standford Rock Trail during and after Project construction.

The Conservancy and LTBMU will achieve significant cost and time savings by working together to jointly plan and implement the Project. Working across jurisdictional boundaries results in efficiency because planning and building one larger project is less costly than two smaller efforts. The LTBMU in-house crews are highly specialized as they have substantial experience constructing stream restoration projects and complete high-quality work. They also accomplish restoration work with reasonable costs and save time because they are already employed by the LTBMU. Working together on the Project is a great way to increase the pace and scale of restoration under the Cutting the Green Tape initiative.

3. Schedule for the Recommended Action
Conservancy staff will work with the DGS and LTBMU to finalize all agreements by early 2027. Future phases of the Project are shown in the table below.

Phase	**Completion Date**
Final Design	Fall 2026
Permitting	Spring 2027
Implementation	Fall 2027
Monitoring and Adaptive Management	Fall 2031

Financing
Following authorization, the Conservancy will expend up to $200,000 for Project design and permit applications. This funding supplements the approximately $400,000 of SNPLMA funding, which the LTBMU previously provided for Project planning.

The LTBMU is still preparing the Project implementation cost estimate, but anticipates it to be below $1 million. The LTBMU plans to provide approximately $435,000 from Lake Tahoe Restoration Act (LTRA) funding and is pursuing other funding sources. The Conservancy will provide up to $300,000 from Proposition 4, but may reduce this amount if implementation costs are below the estimate or if the LTBMU receives other funds for construction. The following table shows the funding from the Conservancy and LTBMU, including funds in this authorization.

Funding Source	**Phase**	**Amount**
LTBMU SNPLMA	Planning (previously authorized)	$400,000
Conservancy Proposition 4	Final Design and Permitting (this authorization)	$200,000
Conservancy Proposition 4	Implementation (this authorization)	$300,000
LTBMU 2027 LTRA	Implementation	$435,000
Total		**$1,335,000**

Authority

Consistency with the Conservancy's Enabling Legislation
The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. Specifically, under Government Code section 66907.9, the Conservancy is authorized to initiate, negotiate, and participate in agreements for the management of land under its ownership and control with local public agencies, state agencies, federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, individuals, corporate entities, or partnerships. Government Code section 66907.10 authorizes the Conservancy to improve and develop acquired lands for a variety of purposes, including protection of the natural environment.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan
The recommended action advances the Conservancy's Strategic Plan Goals to Restore the Basin's Social and Ecological Resilience and Drive Forward-Thinking Solutions and Accountability.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Program Guidelines
The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's Stream Environment Program Objectives and Forestry Program Guidelines. The potential improvements enhance habitat, improve water quality, reduce wildfire risk, and create an environment that is more resilient to climate change. Conifer removal reduces the risk of property and forest loss from catastrophic wildfire and increases the health and vigor of the retained vegetation and trees.

Consistency with External Authorities
The recommended action is consistent with the EIP because it supports the implementation of EIP project 01.02.01.0051. Further, the Project helps attain the Lake Tahoe Total Maximum Daily Load objectives set by the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the stream environment zone restoration and wildlife habitat environmental thresholds identified by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. It also supports several important California state mandates and plans, such as the Pathways to 30x30 strategy, the State Wildlife Action Plan, the Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan, and the Climate Adaptation Strategy.

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act
Under the SERP, projects that restore habitat for native fish and wildlife and comply with all other requirements of Public Resources Code (PRC) § 21080.56 are exempt from CEQA. The Project qualifies for the SERP because it will restore habitat for California native fish and wildlife in Ward Creek and on the adjacent floodplain and upland.

The following steps have been taken to comply with PRC § 21080.56. The Conservancy Executive Director determined on April 16, 2026, that the Project is exempt from CEQA under PRC § 21080.56. The Conservancy submitted this determination to the CDFW for review on April 16, 2026, and the Conservancy received the CDFW concurrence letter on May 27, 2026 (Attachment 4). The Executive Director will take final action to carry out the

Project in accordance with Board direction and the staff will file a Notice of Exemption (Attachment 5) within 48 hours of the final action pursuant to PRC § 21108.

List of Attachments

Attachment 1 – Resolution 26-06-05
Attachment 2 – Location Map
Attachment 3 – Project Area Map
Attachment 4 – CDFW SERP Concurrence
Attachment 5 – Notice of Exemption

- Exhibit A Notice of Exemption Map

Conservancy Staff Contact

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