

Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative Update

Executive Summary

The Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI) is a landscape-level partnership that builds resilience and helps forests withstand, adapt to, and recover from climate-driven disturbances. TCSI partners coordinate science, funding, and regional planning to accelerate forest restoration across 2.4 million acres in the central Sierra Nevada (Attachment 1). The California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy) and Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) lead the TCSI and work closely with partners across the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) and central Sierra to share resources and tackle emerging challenges. This coordinated approach serves as a scalable model for landscape management across California and beyond.

Background

The Sierra Nevada landscape provides critical natural resources but is imperiled by climate change. Climate change has dramatically affected the Sierra Nevada, with more intense droughts and floods, and shifting weather patterns altering both the landscape and the communities. Wildfires have become increasingly severe, with 15 of California's 20 most destructive fires occurring since 2013. A prolonged drought from 2012 to 2016, coupled with over a century of mismanaged forests and bark beetle outbreaks, killed an estimated 102–147 million trees in the Sierra Nevada. This massive tree die-off transformed forest health, increased fire risk, and jeopardized water supply. A proliferation of megafires during and after the drought burned millions of acres and threatened communities across the state.

These large-scale challenges demand large-scale solutions. In 2015, restoration practitioners in the central Sierra began organizing, planning, and implementing larger forestry projects. Examples of these early efforts include the French Meadows Restoration Project (22,000 acres) and the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership (60,000 acres), the latter of which the Conservancy helped lead (Attachment 1). These projects piloted large-scale and cross-jurisdictional “all lands” planning and strategic alignment, demonstrating critical tactics to increase the scale of implementation and prescribed fire. These initiatives, and the SNC's Watershed Improvement Program, applied holistic, watershed-scale approaches to restore forests, rivers, and floodplains, while protecting communities from wildfire.

Practitioners learned that even larger scale approaches were necessary to overcome the barriers that slow forest management. Addressing systemic barriers such as funding, biomass, regulatory, and capacity challenges requires working together over millions of acres. To meet this need, partners organized landscape-level collaboratives including the

TCSI and the state-level Tree Mortality Task Force, which led to establishment of the California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force (Task Force). Scientific research also demonstrates that operating at the scale of one to three million acres can more effectively boost carbon storage, reduce wildfire severity, and strengthen ecosystem resilience, compared with implementing many smaller projects separately.

The TCSI Partnership

The Conservancy, SNC, and several National Forests established the TCSI in 2017 and defined its 2.4-million-acre boundary (Attachment 1). The TCSI area includes several major watersheds including the Basin and the Truckee River, Yuba River, Bear River, and American River watersheds. TCSI partners are scientists, land managers, conveners, funders, and implementers, who apply an all-lands approach to federal, tribal, state, and private lands. TCSI partners meet and communicate regularly to collaborate on new projects, share progress, and develop technologies and strategies to utilize wood biproducts, comply with regulations, build capacity, and secure funding.

A primary TCSI goal is to create resilient forests that withstand the effects of climate change. This includes breaking the cycle of tree mortality and stopping the beetle infestation, by creating healthier and drought-resilient forests. TCSI partners manage forests at the watershed scale to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires. This involves coordinating fuel reduction efforts, such as strategic thinning and prescribed burns, across jurisdictional boundaries. TCSI partners also communicate successes and share challenges with policy agencies and state-level decision makers.

TCSI partners advance a landscape approach because wildfire does not stop at jurisdictional or watershed boundaries. Fuels reduction on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada is critical to the fire safety of the Basin, as prevailing southwest winds drive fires across the Sierra Nevada. The Caldor Fire, for example, travelled from the Cosumnes and American River watersheds, over the Sierra Crest and into the Basin. The Caldor Fire is one of only two fires that ever crossed the Sierra Crest, and both occurred in the last five years. Further, the Basin likely supported habitat refugia for displaced species migrating from the Caldor (2021), King (2014), and Mosquito Fires (2022). This interconnected nature of the Basin with the west slope emphasizes the importance of the Conservancy co-leading the TCSI with SNC.

TCSI Accomplishments

In its beginning, the TCSI invested significantly in science, technologies, and landscape planning. The Conservancy, SNC, and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) provided financial resources, and scientists characterized the landscape to identify priority locations for forest restoration. As a part of this, scientists defined the Pillars of Resilience Framework (Framework), which is a set of ten ecological and social goals, that creates a shared vision for a landscape that can withstand climate change, wildfires, and other threats. The Framework informed additional science to assess conditions across the 2.4-million-acre landscape (TCSI Landscape Assessment). These

early efforts also resulted in various new technologies and tools that streamline and accelerate the planning process. One example is the expedited spotted owl protocol that supports shorter planning timelines. Several new software applications help land managers prioritize projects and evaluate large amounts of data and variables within the landscape.

In 2020, TCSI partners secured over \$32 million in CAL FIRE California Climate Investments grant funding. Partners used this funding to implement critical forest health projects across 20,000 acres of federal, state, and private lands. This funding supported significant progress in treating the landscape to increase the pace of restoration. TCSI partners implemented priority projects instead of competing for grant funding. Under the single grant, partners also increased efficiency by consolidating reporting and invoicing into one structured agreement, reducing administrative tasks and burdens.

TCSI partners explored and supported approaches to use and process biomass resulting from forestry operations. In 2020, The Nature Conservancy, on behalf of the TCSI, commissioned a wood supply analysis and identified a shortage of local, mid-sized biomass facilities. Shortly thereafter, the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California (Washoe Tribe) and private investors opened a sawmill in Carson City to fulfill this need. In 2024, the TCSI supported local wood processing facilities by collaborating with federal, Tribal, state, nonprofit, and industry partners to envision a large-scale wood supply contract that benefits both local economies and fuel reduction practitioners. These efforts informed the 2026 Master Stewardship Agreement between five National Forests and the Washoe Tribe, which promises to combine wood supply to help meet forest health and fuels reduction targets while generating a beneficial economic feedback loop.

In 2023, TCSI partners published the TCSI 10-Year Regional Plan (Regional Plan), creating a cohesive vision for the landscape and charting a path forward to reach resilience. The Regional Plan outlines strategies and goals for the entire 2.4-million-acre landscape. The Regional Plan also positions the region to receive resources because it directly supports and aligns with the Task Force's and USDA Forest Service's strategies to address the wildfire crisis.

In 2025, TCSI partners launched the Tahoe-Central Sierra Project Tracker (TCS Project Tracker) to track and map all planned projects within the TCSI landscape over the next decade. This tool enables partners to evaluate progress, identify areas for improvement, promote collaboration, and ensure accountability in restoring forest and watershed health and resilience. The Basin's Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program Tracker integrates with the TCS Project Tracker to support coordination across the entire landscape.

Influencing Policy

The Conservancy's leadership and TCSI projects have influenced policy and initiatives across the State and nation. Conservancy staff has promoted watershed approaches to Basin activities as early as the 2000s, understanding that addressing entire interconnected systems is an effective way to reach Basin goals. The Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership, which the Conservancy helped envision and launch in 2015, demonstrated the value of working on a landscape scale to protect resources and communities from climate change. The Conservancy and its partners continue to influence policy by confirming the value of working together to address large-scale problems. The Conservancy and SNC's roles in the TCSI are critical to share lessons learned, pilot new technologies, and elevate key discussions to advance shared restoration goals at multiple scales.

The Framework's impact and replicability reach beyond the TCSI boundary. The Framework informed the Task Force's tools and data, providing the foundation for statewide plans and goals. The Framework also supports many place-based collaboratives to assess landscape conditions, set objectives, plan and implement projects, and measure progress towards resilience.

The TCSI CAL FIRE grant served as an early model for block grants. Block grants are larger funding agreements where partners prioritize and distribute subgrants across a region. The TCSI demonstrated the value of block grants by bundling critical projects and deploying and administering funds efficiently across a landscape. Today, the SNC, CAL FIRE, California Department of Conservation (DOC), and Task Force acknowledge the block grant model as an effective way to fund restoration and build capacity. One example of this is the DOC's Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program that provides block grants to regional partnerships that deliver multiple, measurable benefits and increase capacity.

The 2.4-million-acre TCSI scale and approach influenced National Forests to plan larger projects, address barriers, and reach federal goals. National Forests have initiated several watershed-scale projects and partnerships that streamlined permitting and compliance, and secured funding. The TCSI helped inform the USDA Forest Service's 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy (2022), which identified landscapes nationwide to deploy funding to protect communities and improve forest resilience. The North Yuba Forest Partnership applied the TCSI Landscape Assessment and Framework to help secure \$120 million of federal investment from the Infrastructure and Investment Job Act and Inflation Reduction Act.

Landscape-level planning helped regulatory and policy agencies understand that streamlined processes are critical to reaching cumulative goals. Concurrently, California launched the Cutting the Green Tape Initiative, which the TCSI in part informed. As part of the Cutting the Green Tape Initiative, the California Natural Resources Agency has launched several efforts to suspend and exempt requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act and simplify state permitting requirements. These Cutting the

Green Tape advancements have already proven effective to increase the pace and scale of restoration across the State.

Looking Forward

The TCSI will continue to focus on accelerating the pace of restoration by implementing strategies in the Regional Plan. This includes identifying solutions to secure funding and maintain and expand biomass-utilization infrastructure. TCSI partners will continue to share project tracking tools while advancing knowledge through science, learning exchanges, and webinars.

The TCSI aims to expand its role by connecting, and collaborating with, the many partnerships and over 150 organizations and Tribes that engage in forest health and wildfire resilience projects in the central Sierra (Attachment 2). TCSI partners recognize that working together across agencies, communities, and organizations is critical to completing restoration faster and at a larger scale. By reaching a wider audience and connecting with other forestry collaboratives, the TCSI will further its goals while increasing its influence within its landscape and across California.

The TCSI will publish its first annual impact report to measure collective progress against the Regional Plan. This report will help attract funding, measure progress towards resilience, and serve as a model for other regions in the Sierra Nevada, California, and beyond.

List of Attachments

Attachment 1 – TCSI Overview

Attachment 2 – TCSI Collaboratives

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