

SIERRA NEVADA STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT – POLICY DISCUSSION

FACING NEW CHALLENGES

Background

Since its creation, the SNC has supported the Sierra Nevada Region by providing funding for projects, offering technical assistance and pursuing a variety of partnerships in support of the following program objectives:

- provide increased opportunity for tourism and recreation in the Region
- protect, conserve, and restore the Region's physical, cultural, archaeological, historical, and living resources
- aid in the preservation of working landscapes
- reduce the risk of natural disasters, such as wildfire
- protect and improve water and air quality
- assist the regional economy
- enhance public use and enjoyment of lands owned by the public

Although our sources of funding have limited our actions in some cases, over time we have been active in all of these areas and have implemented an effective suite of programs using the resources available to us.

Today, the Sierra Nevada natural landscape is changing at a pace not seen in recorded history: climate change is altering what we thought we knew about watersheds and forests, and these changes will have impacts on California's fiscal, health and environmental future in terms of increased wildfire and corresponding carbon emissions, decreased carbon storage capacity, habitat diversity and recreation. And, an ever-changing political landscape makes addressing these issues even more complicated.

Some of the important new challenges that SNC should address include:

- a. Massive tree mortality as a result of bark beetle infestation and a years-long drought;
- b. Increasing fire occurrence and severity;
- c. Lack of infrastructure and associated markets to process the amount of biomass that needs to come out of Sierra forests to make them healthy and resilient to climate impacts;
- d. Lack of capacity by land management agencies, NGO's, local government and others to pursue available grants/funding resources, manage grants and implement projects;
- e. New laws and regulations with potential implications and possible funding mechanisms relevant to the Sierra Nevada.

Some new opportunities may also have significant impacts in the coming years:

- a. Potential sources of significant funding with less restrictive spending constraints;
- b. Growth in recreation/tourism interests and resultant opportunities for positive economic benefits across the Region.

To respond to and address the challenges as they've arisen, the SNC has made a series of strategic decisions to maximize our impact by concentrating the resources at our disposal – which often are targeted for particular types of investment (such as water bond funds) or have a sunset date (such as grants funds) – on the most pressing needs. We've narrowed the focus of our remaining Prop 84 and limited Prop 1 grant programs to focus on improving forest health as the highest priority. We recreated our partnership with the United States Forest Service (USFS) to develop and implement the Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) with the goal of increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration to return our forests to a healthy and resilient state. And, this year, we've narrowed focus again under the WIP to the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative (TCSI) to test innovation in a variety of land management and associated activities to get work on the ground immediately and to create a model for further protection in the Sierra Nevada.

SNC funding policy is probably the single most public element of the SNC's activities and mission. To adequately address the environmental challenges identified above, the SNC continues to this day to seek additional funding, preferably a stable, long-term source of funding. What and who we fund, as well as the activities we pursue for funding ourselves, have built the SNC's relationship within the Region, and with partners. Today, as we near the end of our Prop 84 funding and spend our Prop 1 dollars, the SNC faces a potential boom or bust situation. Two new potential funding opportunities (SB 5 and Jerry Meral's water initiative) may provide up to \$305M for implementation of SNC programs. But, at the moment, these funds are not certain. In pursuing additional funds the SNC has rarely considered applying for grant funds as an organization, but has recently, successfully done so under the TCSI, and may consider increasing efforts in this area. Actions we take as we try to stabilize funding and distribute funds across the Region have the potential to address Region-wide problems – and generate more interest in the Region overall – but it also could complicate our relationships with in-Region partners.

Considerations

This suite of issues and questions has potential implications on SNC mission, programs and organizational structure and focus, but also on how we partner in the Region to get the work that needs to be done completed. General questions we hope to address in our Strategic Assessment of the Region and its needs include:

- Do these new challenges call for a “program reset?” What would that look like?
- Does SNC need to reconsider its focus in light of these serious and expanding issues?
- Is a new investment strategy needed? What would that look like, either with or without additional long-term funding?
- Are SNC's partnerships effective? How can they be improved?
- Do SNC's successful programs also have some unintended negative consequences? If so, how should we address them?

In order to answer these questions, we identify various issues and provide more specific information in two broad topics: 1) SNC Programs, Mission and Organizational Structure, and 2) Partnerships. In each of these areas we also integrate a discussion on related funding issues.

TOPIC: SNC Programs, Mission and Organizational Structure

Discussion

The combination of new and continuing environmental challenges, need, in-Region capacity limitations and funding uncertainties raise the question of the role the SNC should be playing to address wide-spread issues so severely impacting our Region. As programs have been developed and implemented, have we been viewing the problems we are addressing with the right focus? What new opportunities should we be embracing to protect the Sierra Nevada? Do changing economic, political, scientific, and social conditions, require current SNC programs to be changed in some new and integrated way?

Programmatic Questions and Considerations

1. How/should SNC change its programs to address, inhibit, prevent, mitigate and/or respond to the impacts brought about by the drought, tree mortality, and/or uncharacteristic wildfire in the Region? How might this change the SNC's roles and programs?
2. If current federal land management budget and staffing trends continue, and massive disturbance events become the norm, should SNC's proactive forest restoration activities shift to post-event recovery activities? What would this look like in terms of funding, programs, and organizational structure?
3. There is a lack of workforce available to adequately address the scope and scale of on the ground environmental issues in the Region (i.e. experienced loggers, truck drivers, registered professional foresters, etc.). This lack of capacity may have implications on SNC's ability to get work done on the ground at the pace and scale needed, especially if we receive significant funding from current legislative bonds and initiatives. What role, if any, should SNC play to address the capacity limitations emerging throughout the Region?
4. New state laws have legalized marijuana in California – which could have significant implications for our Region. Are there new roles or opportunities that the SNC should be considering as a result of these new laws? If yes, what are these and what's the best role for the Conservancy?
5. Regulatory agencies (USDA, SWRCB and Regional Boards, DFW, etcetera) have access to significant funding through fees and fines. While most of this goes to their program implementation, some may be available to the SNC and our partners through annual grant programs, and these entities may be open to partnering on specific programs or projects. Should the SNC, a non-regulatory agency, do more with these regulatory opportunities? Given SNC's existing statutory roles, is it appropriate to engage more directly with regulatory agencies? What are the risks of this kind of shift?
6. Many communities in the SNC Region were sustained through the timber industry. With that industry declining in the Region, is there an opportunity to transition to other economic sectors? What do our economies and our communities need to grow and flourish? What kind of role should SNC play in helping with this transition?

7. Climate change adaptability planning is underway from a variety of CA state agencies – CARB, CNRA, DWR, OPR, etc. – with many of the mitigation recommendations to be implemented in the SNC Region such as carbon sequestration, watershed protection, etc. How can the SNC improve our efforts to bridge the communication gap between rural communities and state planning efforts? What is the appropriate role for SNC in connecting the federal land management agencies with these state planning efforts, since most implementation in the Region will occur on federal lands? How should rapidly-developing scientific perspectives be incorporated into these and all of our climate-based efforts?
8. Many collaboratives have sprung up throughout SNC's Region over time, and there are questions emerging about how to sustain them. What role should SNC take to support new collaboratives throughout the Region and what does this look like?
9. Iconic outdoor recreation experiences throughout the Sierra Nevada are enjoying record-levels of visitation. How/should SNC capitalize on this trend in order to build “branding” and Regional support for action in other areas? What role, if any should SNC play in developing sustainable tourism/recreation strategic planning and implementation in communities throughout the Region?

Funding Questions and Considerations

1. SNC activities have largely been guided by funding availability (Proposition 84, Proposition 1). How/should passage of a more expansive parks bond and or water infrastructure initiative change our current programmatic focus and/or our organizational structure? What is missing that could be addressed by program/structure changes?
2. Does having significantly more money mean expanding current forest health focus to include meadow restoration, trails development, and/or facilities improvement projects in this category? Should we reconsider funding acquisitions?
3. Should the amount of funding received in a new bond or water initiative, if approved by voters in 2018, have us re-think our competitive grant process? What are the implications of going to a more directed funding model? What funding criteria should be established?
4. Are there as-yet unexplored opportunities to expand our emphasis to include socio-cultural or economic issues in the Region – for example, recreation? If so, what are the parameters?

TOPIC: PARTNERSHIPS

Discussion

Partnerships are essential for getting work done in an area as large and diverse as the Sierra Nevada. The USFS is the largest landowner in the Region, and the SNC has partnered with them most recently in our Watershed Improvement Program. What are the implications of SNC's close relationship with the USFS – are there unintended consequences that we need to be considering? Furthermore, additional partners will be necessary to address Regional needs, which go beyond forest and watershed health to community vibrancy and climate adaptation. With whom should the SNC develop these partnerships? Regulatory agencies? Stakeholders who operate outside of the Region, including national and international organizations? What do these partnerships look like and how do they provide benefits across the Region? And finally, what existing partnerships need strengthening?

Programmatic Questions and Considerations

1. The USFS has been an important partner to the SNC, and we have focused a great deal of energy on solidifying and building that partnership. Given the shift in priorities at the federal level, we expect that USFS funding, program and resource cuts may continue, exacerbating land management problems and limiting protection and restoration efforts. Should this change have an effect on the SNC-USFS partnership? What would that change look like?
2. What are the impacts of SNC's close relationship with the USFS on other stakeholders or potential partners? Are important connections limited due to this partnership? If so, with whom?
3. SNC's Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) is currently focusing primarily on the Tahoe Central-Sierra Initiative (TCSI). Given the TCSI addresses only a portion of the region and only focuses on forest/watershed-related issues, how does the WIP remain a relevant program throughout the entire SNC Region? What are ways for more stakeholders to engage and connect with WIP? How can WIP inform planning/implementation efforts in all SNC sub-regions?
4. The TCSI brought together federal and state agencies and NGOs to collaborate on a large, landscape-level project. Is this a collaboration model for SNC to export to other sub-regions? Can this model build capacity for implementing such projects in other parts of the Region?
5. Are there important partnerships that could be developed through a more active role with state regulators? What would this look like? What are the risks of this kind of shift?
6. What new challenges and changing conditions are our partners facing that impact the ways in which we work with them? What partnership opportunities have we been missing, and are there strategic partners we have overlooked who could help us to gain ground? What new partnerships should we be developing? What existing partnerships should we strengthen? How?

Funding Questions and Considerations

- 1.** Does it matter that SNC competed against other entities in the Region for funding for the TCSI? Should SNC develop criteria for evaluating what projects it wants to engage with so all emerging opportunities can be considered?
- 2.** What role should TCSI play in determining how SNC focuses time and resources? Does the SNC set up unexpected funding competition between grantees and partners by engaging in partnerships with narrow geographic focus, like the TCSI.
- 3.** Stakeholders throughout the Region are watching the development of SNC-supported programs, including the TCSI. While the intent of the project is to tease out approaches that can be applied effectively in other sub-regions, it is understandable that stakeholders who do not work in the TCSI area may be skeptical as to the benefits they will see, if any. Are we building a process that unfairly (perceived or otherwise) grants “priority” funding to TCSI partners? Are TCSI priorities and partnerships creating perceived “bias” in project funding through the grant program? How should we change the project, if at all? How can we avoid the perception of bias in other projects?