Sequoias to Sloughs Watershed Assessment and Stewardship Initiative
Watershed Group Meeting #1

September 30, 2026 | UC Cooperative Extension Building, Tulare

Overview

This was the inaugural meeting of the Sequoias to Sloughs Watershed Stewardship Group, a voluntary and non-regulatory group of local landowners, conservation and equity organizations, farmers, water managers, applied researchers, and agency partners. The Sequoias to Sloughs Watershed Assessment and Stewardship Initiative is a collaborative multi-stakeholder initiative funded by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to assess watershed conditions and develop a community-driven watershed management plan covering approximately 1,100 square miles of the Tule River and Deer Creek watersheds, from the Sierra Nevada headwaters down to the San Joaquin Valley floor.

Meeting Highlights

- Participants identified priority concerns in the project area, including: respect for private property rights; barriers to effective public forest management; wildfire risk and flood impacts.
- The group acknowledged that key voices are missing: Forest Service, valley floor farmers, Tule River landowners, Farm Bureau.

Meeting Goals:

1. Collectively envision potential outcomes of the Sequoias to Sloughs Initiative.
2. Develop relationships and a shared sense of project opportunities and challenges among participants.
3. Review and resolve questions related to group working norms (i.e., the group charter).
4. Build understanding and alignment on project outcomes, timeline, and process.
5. Clarify next steps to ensure that the Watershed Stewardship Group comprehensively represents interests and issues in the project area.

Materials

- Slidedeck
- Participant Agenda
- Draft Group Charter
- Participation and Stipend Policy



This meeting was funded by the Bureau of Reclamations' WaterSMART grant.

Meeting Notes

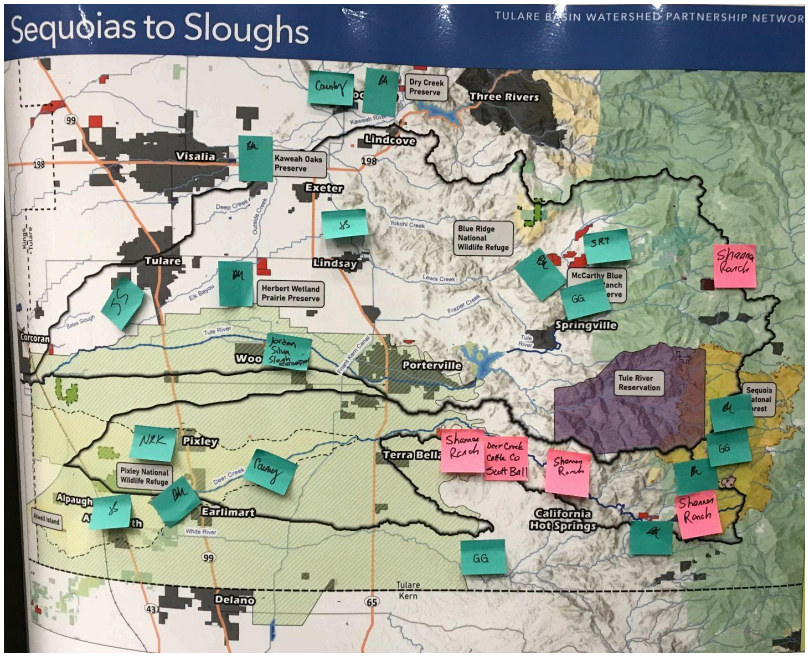
Project Background and Purpose

Steve Haze, Project Lead and Executive Director of the Tulare Basin Watershed Partnership (TBWP), explained the Bureau of Reclamation grant program funding this initiative. It intends to bring stakeholders together to collectively identify problems and develop a viable plan of action. He emphasized that the project is explicitly non-regulatory and voluntary; no government access to private land is required, and nothing goes into a plan without group consensus. The initiative is intended to be a blueprint for other Sierra Nevada watersheds, with Tule River and Deer Creek selected partly because they are manageable in scale and relatively pristine compared to larger, more complex watersheds. The grant totals $300,000 from the Bureau of Reclamation, and includes assessment and planning, not project implementation.

Introductions and Represented Interests

Both in-room and virtual participants introduced themselves, their relevant affiliations, and hopes for the project. Participants also marked the locations they live, work, or are otherwise familiar with on a project area map, shown in the image below. Interests represented at this first meeting included the following:

- Multi-generational ranching families and landowners
- Irrigation districts
- County of Tulare
- Environment and Conservation (Tule Basin Land & Water Conservation Trust, Point Blue Conservation Sciences)
- Drinking water and wastewater for small and/or rural communities (Self Help Enterprises, Central Valley Empowerment Alliance)
- Forest and wildfire management (CAL FIRE, Mountain Home State Forest)
- State water planning



Watershed Stewardship Group Role and Responsibilities

Nicolia Mehrling, Lead Facilitator with Ag Innovations Network, explained the roles and responsibilities of the Watershed Stewardship Group (WSG), the Technical and Regulatory Advisory Committee (TRAC), and the project team.

- The WSG (meeting for the first time at this meeting) is the primary decision-maker for this project. WSG members set priorities, approve vision statements, and guide the plan's direction.
- A TRAC will review for technical rigor (data accuracy, cost estimates, permitting requirements) but does not make decisions.

- The project team (including Steve from Tulare Basin Watershed Partnership, Nicolia, Robert, and Laima from Ag Innovations, and Craig Isola of Central Valley Joint Venture) manages grant administration, drafts technical products, and synthesizes information.
- An advisory group (including DWR) coordinates with regional/statewide efforts to maximize impact and communicate project insights (for example, ensuring the watershed plan aligns with California Water Plan 2028 strategies).
- Decision-making will use consensus: full support or "can live with it" moves things forward; a single "thumbs down" with a major concern halts progress.

Watershed Concerns and Issues

Meeting facilitators ask WSG members to share what problems they experience in the project area and what they hope this project could address. The following concerns are organized by topic area. During the meeting, concerns and priorities were written on flipcharts, which are included at the end of this document (click here to view flipchart photos).

Respect for Private Property Rights

- Multiple ranching families expressed meaningful skepticism toward government involvement, citing past experiences, including:
    - A county study proposed hiking trails and campgrounds on private ranch land without contacting the ranchers
    - After the 2023 flood, ranchers repaired their own bridges when government was absent, then were blocked by county/federal officials from using the repaired bridges
    - Proposed NRCS projects that are seen as unworkable (e.g., fencing off rivers when fences would be destroyed by floods)
- Ranchers suggested allowing landowners to manage creek channels along Deer Creek, without regulatory barriers (including removing debris, clearing brush).
- Trespass, vandalism, and misuse of public access on private Deer Creek land continue to be serious issues, including graffiti, stolen vehicles, poaching, livestock shootings, and unauthorized entries.

Consequences of Public Forest Management

- The Castle Fire and Windy Fire devastated upper watershed forests; dead standing timber remains and represents extreme future fire risk. The Sequoia National Monument designation (signed ~2001) stopped timber harvesting plans, and participants argued this directly caused the catastrophic fire conditions
- Sierra Club litigation was cited as blocking post-fire salvage logging of green timber immediately after the fire; now the Forest Service is logging the same area for chips with no commercial value.
- Mountain Home State Forest (~5,000 acres, managed by CAL FIRE) was cited as a positive state-managed example. It withstood fires because of active management, including mastication funded by ~$350,000 from a conservancy grant.
- Participants advocated for solutions that increase the pace and scale of Forest Service treatments, reduce federal litigation that blocks projects, allow prescribed burning, and expand treatments beyond roadsides.
- Landowners advised against fencing off creeks because maintenance costs are prohibitive, willows undermine fences, and cattle need cross-creek access.

Water Management & Flood Issues

- The 2023 flood inundated over 100,000 acres of farmland, caused massive debris accumulation in creek channels, and threatened city homes and infrastructure.

    - Three years later, ranchers along Deer Creek have piles of flood debris they cannot burn due to air quality restrictions and cannot afford to haul away.
    - Regulations currently hinder stream channel clearing, but ranchers contend that if they were allowed to clear the channels, bridges would be less likely to wash out during floods.
- Participants emphasized the importance of contextualizing waterways when discussing management: Deer Creek pre-Windy Fire produced approximately 12,000 acre-feet per year and is not a major ag-sustaining river.
- Concerns were raised about groundwater subsidence, water taxes, and long-term sustainability for valley-floor farming and communities due to groundwater regulations.
- One participant suggested building additional dams to increase water storage and expressed frustration that existing infrastructure is underutilized.
- Invasive species (e.g., yellow starthistle expanding from ~500 acres to ~70,000 acres over five years) were flagged as an underappreciated threat to rangeland forage quality and watershed health.
- Water management must protect and provide clean water and support the livelihoods of local communities and future generations.

Vision and Shared Goals

Nicolia presented example vision statements from other watershed groups to illustrate the range and purpose of a shared vision. Participants from the valley floor acknowledged they know little about upper watershed conditions and need that perspective to protect downstream interests. One participant articulated the watershed-as-shared-resource concept: if managed collectively, one drop of water that falls as snow in the Sequoias can benefit forage production for upper ranchers and valley floor farms and communities.

Discussion identified the following areas of potential common ground:

- Active forest management in the upper watershed benefits everyone downstream
- Reducing bureaucratic barriers to accessing disaster/conservation funds
- Preventing new large-scale industrial development that would deplete local resources
- Keeping outside interests from dictating local decisions
- Opposing litigation as a shared priority

California Water Plan 2028 & State Context

- Jordi Vasquez from the Department of Water Resources explained that Senate Bill 72 directs California to develop strategies to achieve 9 million acre-feet of additional water by 2040; the DWR will do this through the California Water Plan update process.
- Open invite: regional advisory committee meetings are scheduled:
    - October 6 webinar on regional planning efforts
    - November 4–5: in-person (Visalia) and online advisory committee meeting for California Water Plan 2028
- DWR's role in this Sequoias to Sloughs watershed project is advisory: providing datasets, limited funding, and coordination, not regulatory enforcement.
- DWR sees the watershed as a multi-benefit opportunity: flood risk reduction, wildfire risk reduction, groundwater recharge, and improved water quality. The hope is that land and water planning will move away from siloed approaches.

Process and Logistics

Nicolia presented the project process and answered participant questions.

- The meeting was the first of ten planned meetings, which will occur roughly every 3 months over 2.5 years.
- Timeline for the planning process:
    - Assessment (identifying problems/concerns): through next spring
    - Prioritization (which problems to address): through next summer
    - Goal-setting and project identification: through next fall
    - Final plan compilation: wrapping up with multiple review cycles
- Stipends are available for participants not otherwise compensated for their time; a tax form (W-9) is required.
- The group acknowledged that key voices are missing: Forest Service, more ranchers, valley floor farmers, Tule River landowners, and Farm Bureau representation.
    - Note: The Tulare County Farm Bureau has a new Executive Director, and one WSG member sits on the Farm Bureau Board

Next Steps

- Next planned event: A half-day tour of the project area on November 4th to help participants who know one part of the watershed learn about other parts.
- The project team will recruit additional WSG members from the underrepresented interest groups identified. Please contact them with any personal connections or recommendations on members to contact.

Participant Concerns and Priorities: Flipchart Photos

