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TAHOE NATIONAL FOREST
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PCWA
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The Nature
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AMERICAN RIVER
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Innovative Partnership Will Restore Sierra Nevada Forest Health

How a water agency, conservation organizations and local, State and Federal government found common ground in the Tahoe National Forest

FRENCH MEADOWS, Calif. – The U.S. Forest Service today announced final approval of the French Meadows Forest Restoration Project, an innovative forest health project aimed at reducing wildfire risk in a critical municipal watershed. This landscape-scale project, covering 30,000 acres of public and private land around French Meadows Reservoir, west of Lake Tahoe, is a public-private partnership that can serve as a model for increasing the pace and scale of ecologically-based forest management and fuels reduction throughout the Sierra Nevada.

The project involves clearing underbrush, thinning smaller trees, removing biomass to renewable energy facilities, reforestation, restoring meadows and prescribed fire. The goals are to promote forest resilience to stressors such as wildfire, insect and disease outbreaks and climate change, as well as protect and restore habitat for fish and wildlife and safeguard water supply and resources. Work is expected to begin as soon as the snow melts, around May or June 2019.

With limited [Forest Service](#) resources already engaged on other forest resiliency projects in the American River watershed, a diverse group of partners rolled up their sleeves to design, manage and fund the project in close partnership with the Forest Service. Key partners include [Placer County Water Agency](#), which owns and operates French Meadows Reservoir and associated

hydropower facilities; [The Nature Conservancy](#), which helped to design and fund the effort; [Placer County](#), which helped to fund the work and will co-lead the implementation with The Nature Conservancy; [American River Conservancy](#), which owns and is restoring adjacent forests as part of the broader project; the [Sierra Nevada Research Institute at the University of California, Merced](#), which is researching the connection between healthy forests and water supply; and the [Sierra Nevada Conservancy](#), a state agency whose mission is to improve the environmental, economic, and social well-being of the Sierra Nevada region.

According to Tahoe National Forest Supervisor Eli Ilano, “This project simply would not have happened without the hard work of our partners. We need more diverse partners like these, here and across California, to help in our efforts to increase the resiliency of millions of national forest acres. The only way to accomplish this monumental task is through collaborative stewardship.”

PCWA General Manager, Einar Maisch, said, “The 2014 King Fire was a reminder of the devastating effect wildfires have on water supply and water quality. The massive erosion caused by the King Fire degraded streams and damaged water, power, and transportation infrastructure, leading to millions of dollars of on-going clean-up costs for our ratepayers and the general public. The State’s long-term water security depends on healthy forests and watersheds.”

David Edelson, Sierra Nevada Program Director for The Nature Conservancy, said, “The French Meadows Project takes an ecological approach to forest management and fuels reduction, using restorative thinning to remove the smaller trees and brush, while keeping the larger trees that are critical for wildlife habitat and carbon storage. The project will also use prescribed fire, where safe and appropriate, to promote forest resilience.”

“Healthy, resilient forests are essential to our economy, safety and well-being,” said Jim Holmes, chair of the Placer County Board of Supervisors. “By investing in the long-term resilience of French Meadows, we protect our hydroelectric power and recreational opportunities while improving forest health.”

“Unhealthy forests in the Sierra are a problem on both private and public lands,” said Elena DeLacy, American River Conservancy Executive Director. “We hope this project will put an end to finger pointing and signal the beginning of collaborative, proactive forest restoration at the landscape scale.”

“This is not a random act of conservation, it is a strategic investment in a critical landscape,” said Sierra Nevada Conservancy Regional Manager Andy Fristensky. “The importance of restoring this headwater forest is evidenced by the diversity of partners who have pitched in to fund the work.”

The French Meadows Project also includes innovative research on the link between healthy forested watersheds and water supply, led by the Sierra Nevada Research Institute. “UC Merced researchers are developing information on the water-related benefits of forest treatments, which together with the reduced wildfire risk from forest thinning, is essential for developing local partnerships for treatment programs across Sierra Nevada forests,” said Roger Bales, Director of the Sierra Nevada Research Institute.

Hotter and drier conditions, decades of fire suppression and past logging practices have combined to make California's forests more vulnerable to high-severity wildfire. Massive tree die-offs due to years of drought and widespread insect infestations, year-round fire weather conditions, and overgrown young-growth forests, have all combined to create severe fire risks, particularly in the Sierra. The uptick in devastating megafires puts people and nature at risk. They can also damage vast expanses of forest habitat, threaten the lives of people and communities nearby, and threaten the source of water for millions of people.

"Through innovative partnerships like the French Meadows Partnership, we can plan and implement more fuels reduction and forest health projects on the Tahoe and other national forests, helping to reduce the risk of megafires to people and nature," said Ilano.

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The mission of the U.S. Forest Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world. Public lands the Forest Service manages contribute more than \$13 billion to the economy each year through visitor spending alone. Those same lands provide 20 percent of the nation's clean water supply, a value estimated at \$7.2 billion per year. The agency has either a direct or indirect role in stewardship of about 80 percent of the 850 million forested acres within the U.S., of which 100 million acres are urban forests where most Americans live.