



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES  
OF CALIFORNIA

March 17, 2016

Mr. Jim Branham, Executive Officer  
Sierra Nevada Conservancy  
11521 Blocker Dr., Ste. 205  
Auburn, CA 95603

**RE: Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program Regional Strategy**

Dear Mr. Branham:

The Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) is an association of thirty-five rural California counties, and our membership includes twenty of the twenty-two counties encompassed by the jurisdiction of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC). RCRC member counties are tasked with a variety of decision-making responsibilities related to land use and development in rural California communities and are challenged with environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social equity at the local level. RCRC appreciates this opportunity to offer our comments on the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program (WIP) Regional Strategy (Strategy).

RCRC is pleased that the SNC is lending its resources and expertise to this program in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5). California's national forest lands have suffered from decades of inadequate management practices due to a number of factors including the dysfunctional funding structure of the USFS that leads to the practice of fire borrowing. Under the current structure, our national forest lands continue to experience unprecedented occurrences of high severity wildfire each year, losing vital carbon sequestration capacity in the process and compromising the health of our forested watersheds, because Region 5 is unable to effectively fund and implement its forest management programs. As the Strategy states, the Sierra Nevada Region provides critical water supply to the rest of the State, and we believe the WIP could be a linchpin to real improvements in the health of the Region's forested watersheds.

RCRC also believes that local governments have a vital role to play in the WIP and have invaluable expertise on the ground with restoration and management projects. For example, the six counties that have been designated as High Hazard Zones due to drought-induced tree mortality are already well into mitigation and restoration projects to address dead and dying trees, and have a wealth of knowledge that will be advantageous

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to the implementation of the WIP. We are confident that SNC's collaborative history with the counties within its jurisdiction will help further facilitate county input in the WIP and guarantee that local governments are viewed as partners in the program, as well as help create socioeconomic benefits for rural communities within SNC's jurisdiction.

During our evaluation of the WIP Strategy, RCRC identified a few areas that we felt need more emphasis as the program moves forward. For example, RCRC would like to see a more robust discussion on the implications of disease and the benefit of improving aquatic resources in the Sierra Nevada Region, as we feel this one of the most evident statewide benefits that will result from the WIP. The Strategy also does not specifically call out the intent to engage tribal landowners, which will be vital in creating a truly collaborative effort in the Region.

Finally, while RCRC acknowledges the importance of the WIP to our communities within the Sierra Nevada Region, we also stress that the health of forested watersheds is not just a rural issue. As the Strategy states, the Sierra Nevada Region is the source of origin for more than 60 percent of the State's developed water supply, headwaters of the State Water Project, and federal Central Valley Project, and primary source of fresh water for the delta. Add to that the immense carbon storage potential, wildlife habitat, and other co-benefits of a healthy forested watershed, and it is clear that what happens in the Region impacts the entire State. The health of rural, forested California is of vital importance to all Californians, and this is a message that cannot be stressed enough as the WIP moves forward.

RCRC looks forward to our continued engagement on the WIP in the future as the program progresses. If you should have any questions or would like to discuss our comments further, please contact me at (916) 447-4806 or [sheaton@rcrcnet.org](mailto:sheaton@rcrcnet.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Staci Heaton", written in a cursive style.

STACI HEATON  
Regulatory Affairs Advocate