

SYRCL, Nisenan join multi-agency effort to restore North Yuba River watershed

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Members of the North Yuba Forest Partnership attend a field tour of the Yuba Project in the Tahoe National Forest to discuss opportunities in the region.
Photos courtesy Yuba Water Agency



FOR MORE INFO

To learn more, visit the partnership website at yubaforests.org

The South Yuba River Citizens League and Nevada City Rancheria have joined seven other groups in a long-ranging and ambitious plan to reduce wildfire risk and secure healthier, more resilient forests throughout the North Yuba River watershed.

“You can’t have a healthy watershed without a healthy forest,” said SYRCL Executive Director Melinda Booth.

The collaborators – which also include North Yuba Forest Partnership includes Blue Forest Conservation, Camptonville Community Partnership, National Forest Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Sierra County, the United States Forest Service-Tahoe National Forest and Yuba Water Agency – signed a memorandum of understanding earlier this month that spells out some of the details. The North Yuba Forest partnership primarily will use ecologically based thinning and prescribed fire for projects in the 275,000-acre watershed, which runs through multiple counties and two national forests, from Yuba Pass to New Bullards Bar Reservoir.

The highest priority will be given to at-risk communities, emergency response, evacuation access routes, forests of critical ecological importance, and areas that have the potential to stop a wildfire from spreading, a release stated.

Entering a partnership involving the North Yuba is not a stretch for SYRCL, Booth said.

While the roots of the organization 36 years ago began with the goal of keeping dams off the South Yuba, SYRCL has evolved since then, Booth said.

SYRCL, she added, has been working on watershed issues for decades, including meadow restoration projects in the North Yuba and headwaters areas.

The “innovative” partnership has been in the works for the last year, Booth said, adding that the genesis was wildfire risk mitigation but also encompasses making sure forests are resilient in the face of climate change.

“The standard take on logging for the past 50 years has been, don’t cut down the trees,” Booth said, pointing to a shift in thinking. “Fifty years ago, we weren’t thinking about climate change and forest resiliency. ... Because we’ve prevented forest fires, the forest has changed. It’s more susceptible to megafires like the ones we’ve been experiencing.”

The forests are crowded right now with a lot of smaller trees, she said.

“They require thinning and reintroducing fire to the landscape, so that in the future you have fewer trees but larger and older trees,” Booth explained. “If a fire came through, it would burn (through) and not decimate everything in its path. It would burn through the understory instead of getting into the tops of the trees.”

Much of the partnership boundaries – 210,000 acres – is U.S. Forest Service land, Booth said, adding that agency has been using controlled burns as a tool to manage the forest for a number of years.

Not all of the “huge” project area will be treated, Booth said. The partnership will choose the areas most in need of management.

“There is not a one size fits all prescription,” she said.

Three different models are being used – historical modeling by the forest service of what the forest used to look like; a reference study being conducted by the Tahoe Central Sierra Initiative looking at variables including climate change; and on the ground observation and remote sensing.

While planning efforts for the larger North Yuba River watershed are just beginning, the 14,500-acre Yuba Project is already underway, serving as a pilot.

“We’re focusing on this area to learn about what works and what’s needed,” Booth said. “They have been doing quite a bit of forest thinning.”

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