

French Meadows Forest Restoration Project

February 2019



The 28,000-acre French Meadows Forest Restoration Project is using a collaborative, all-lands approach to restore forest health and resilience and reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire in the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the American River, a critical municipal watershed located on the Tahoe National Forest in California's Sierra Nevada.

The Project was developed by a diverse partnership, including the U.S. Forest Service, which manages most of the land within the project area; Placer County Water Agency, which manages two reservoirs downstream of the project for municipal water and hydropower; The Nature Conservancy, one of the world's largest conservation organizations; the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency and funder; Placer County, a business partner in the hydropower project; the American River Conservancy, an adjacent private landowner; and the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at UC Merced.

The French Meadows Project aims to accelerate ecologically-based forest and watershed restoration on the Tahoe National Forest through a shared stewardship approach involving:

- Collaborative Management. The partners co-led development of the project and hired consultants to undertake planning and environmental analysis, substantially reducing the planning time for similar Forest Service projects.
- Diverse Fundraising. The partners raised funds from a wide variety of federal, state, local, and private sources, including significant investment from downstream water beneficiaries like the water utility and private beverage companies.
- Innovative Project Implementation. Placer County will hire contractors to implement thinning and other mechanical treatments, under a Master Stewardship Agreement with the Forest Service. The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service will work together to develop and implement a prescribed burn plan.
- Watershed Research. The Sierra Nevada Research Institute is leading research to better understand and quantify the Project's potential forest health and water supply benefits.

Like many Sierra forests, forests in the project area are unhealthy and at risk of uncharacteristic, high-severity wildfire due to past management, fire suppression, increased drought severity, and a warming climate. Severe wildfires in recent years have burned thousands of forested acres in the American River watershed, causing hundreds of thousands of tons of topsoil to erode into the river system, clogging infrastructure and degrading wildlife habitat, water quality and watershed health.

In 2015, The Nature Conservancy assisted the American River Conservancy in acquiring 10,000 acres known as the American River Headwaters. Through discussions with the Tahoe National Forest and Placer County Water Agency, the groups realized that restoring the watershed to a more resilient condition required expanding the project to include nearby Forest Service lands. This led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding in 2016 in which the partners agreed to collaborate on the French Meadows Project.

The restoration of the American River Headwaters is proceeding expeditiously. Over 3,000 acres were restored and donated to the Tahoe National Forest for addition to the Granite Chief Wilderness in 2017. To date, ARC has reduced forest fuels on approximately 375 acres, restored 13 acres of meadow and over 40 stream crossings, and created 7 miles of new trail, with funding from the Forest Service, State of California, and private donors. Restoration on ARC lands is likely to continue through 2021.

In 2018, the Forest Service signed a Decision Notice approving the French Meadows Project; on-the-ground implementation of the Forest Service lands will begin in 2019 and continue for several years. To test the effectiveness of the treatments, state-of-the-art fire modeling was undertaken to predict likely fire behavior both with and without treatments. The modeling showed that the project will significantly reduce the risk of high-severity wildfire across the project area and on adjacent lands.

The French Meadows Project will treat over 12,000 acres with mechanical thinning, mastication, hand thinning, reforestation, and aspen and meadow restoration under a Master Stewardship Agreement between Placer County and the Tahoe National Forest. The plan for 2019 is to treat over 2,000 acres utilizing local, experienced contractors, bringing more than 3.5 million board feet to a local mill and over 10,000 tons of biomass to a local renewable energy facility; revenues from the sale of wood products and biomass will be used to partially fund the Project. In addition, the Project involves more than 7,000 acres of prescribed burning, to be managed by The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service, including 200 acres planned in 2019.

The overall budget for implementing the French Meadows Project is \$12-14 million. To date, the partners have accumulated over \$7 million toward this goal from their own funding and grant awards, including \$3.5 million from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection under the California Climate Investments Program. Fundraising efforts are ongoing to complete the restoration.

Through this innovative collaboration, the partners are aiming not only to restore forest health and resilience in the American River Headwaters/French Meadows Project area, but also to establish a model that can be used to increase the pace and scale of forest and watershed restoration and fuels reduction throughout the Sierra Nevada.

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