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STAFF REPORT

Date: November 13, 2019

To: TRPA Governing Board

From: TRPA Staff

Subject: Lake Tahoe West Landscape Restoration Strategy

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Summary and Staff Recommendation:

Staff will present on the Lake Tahoe West (LTW) Landscape Restoration Strategy (LRS) developed collaboratively with stakeholders, federal, state, and regional agencies. Staff will review how the Landscape Restoration Strategy will facilitate Chapter 61 (Vegetation and Forest Health) code update regarding mechanical thinning on 30%-50% slopes. This item is for informational purposes and no action is required.

Background and Review:

Lake Tahoe West formed in 2016 to focus on scaling up and accelerating restoration and increasing the social-ecological resilience of forests, watersheds, recreational opportunities, and communities across 60,000 acres of Lake Tahoe's west shore. The LTW Landscape Restoration Strategy reflects an extraordinary amount of collaboration and consensus building among agencies, scientists, and stakeholders. Four public agencies –the Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (Forest Service LTBMU), California Tahoe Conservancy, California State Parks, and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency –joined with the non-profit National Forest Foundation, Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station ,and interagency Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team to launch Lake Tahoe West in 2016. The Lake Tahoe West partners developed the LRS using the best available science, including a Landscape Resilience Assessment and computer modeling of future forest conditions and wildfire risk in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The LRS identifies six goals for a resilient landscape. The Goals reflect long-term desired conditions for forests, fire, native species and ecological communities, water and watersheds, communities, and regional economies, as follows:

- Goal 1. Forests recover from fire, drought, and insect and disease outbreaks.
- Goal 2. Fires burn at primarily low to moderate severities and provide ecological benefits.
- Goal 3. Terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems support native species.
- Goal 4. Healthy creeks and floodplains provide clean water, complex habitat, and buffering from floods and droughts.
- Goal 5. People live safely with fire and enjoy and steward the landscape.
- Goal 6. Restoration is efficient, collaborative, and supports a strong economy.

In the planning phase, Lake Tahoe West will analyze potential impacts from updating the TRPA code to allow for mechanical thinning and treatments on 30% to 50% slopes. Currently the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Code of Ordinances limits steep slope access with ground-based mechanical thinning equipment. This policy was written to prevent erosion from the use of heavy mechanical equipment. In the past decade, new innovative technologies and harvest methods for mechanical thinning have made it possible for managers to treat steeper slopes while still providing resource protections. These newer technologies have low-pressure systems that significantly reduce soil impacts. Special attention to areas with sensitive soils, most notably in Ward and Blackwood canyons, can further limit erosion risks in these areas. Managers would consider soil operability conditions when proposing mechanical thinning and would not propose this treatment for shallow erodible soils but for deeper more stable soils. During project planning, partners will analyze the environmental effects of updating the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Code of Ordinances to allow ground-based mechanical treatment of forested areas on 30-50% slopes

Today, managers are still limited to using hand thinning or aerial yarding systems on slopes greater than 30%. Approximately 20% of the Lake Tahoe West landscape has slopes 30-50%. These slopes are a limiting factor in achieving the Goals of the Landscape Restoration Strategy and restoring the resilience of the forest. Allowing ground based mechanical treatments on slopes up to 50% can significantly reduce the number of acres that will require hand thinning and pile burning treatments. By reducing the number of acres that require follow up pile burning, there will be less risk of exacerbating the pile burning backlog. Reducing the need to burn piles allows managers to focus prescribed fire treatments on ecologically beneficial landscape burns. Access to slopes 30-50% also reduces smoke emissions associated with pile burning, allows managers to thin stands to desired conditions, and provides opportunity for utilization of restoration by-products that can provide long-term carbon storage and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Contact Information:

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