

Tuolumne County Resilience through Shared Forest Stewardship

Overview: Tuolumne County is proactively increasing the pace and scale of forest health projects to build local landscape resilience and to protect communities against catastrophic fire.

Challenge: Ten years ago, a catastrophic wildland fire that devastated hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands, including habitats, watersheds, economies and properties, was largely an anomaly in California. In 2013, the Rim Fire in Tuolumne County scorched 400 square miles of the Stanislaus National Forest, in what would become the first in a pattern of disastrous fires in the state. Decades of fire suppression and changes in forest management practices coupled with warming climates have resulted in overstocked stands with denser, drier vegetation—a seemingly insurmountable problem. In Tuolumne County, with nearly 80% of the land publicly managed, primarily split between the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park, this problem had become an unavoidable emergency.

Solution: The Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS) collaborative was created in 2010 with over 30 diverse members with the common goal to increase the pace and scale of forest management and restoration efforts in the Stanislaus National Forest in Tuolumne County. 2013's Rim Fire united the collaborative even deeper to set aside ideological differences and instead focus on areas of consensus. On behalf of and as a member of YSS, Tuolumne County entered into a Master Stewardship Agreement (MSA) with the Stanislaus National Forest in January 2018 to work alongside the Stanislaus National Forest in building resilience and preventing future devastation by fire.

Innovation: By working collaboratively and through a commitment to building and maintaining trust, Tuolumne County works with the YSS Leadership Team and the Stanislaus National Forest to develop projects, seek grant funding and implement projects in our local area. At a time when national, regional, and local resource management discussions are often highly polarized and contentious, the County's Master Stewardship Agreement has effectively brought together representatives of the timber industry, grazing interests, tribal and local government, environmental organizations, business interests, motorized recreation

groups, state and federal agencies, and other diverse interests. Tuolumne County has committed to implement only those projects that have consensus agreement from YSS. The County also only implements projects under the MSA which are in addition to the USFS normal program of work, to ensure we truly are increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration work. Tuolumne County is a logical and successful partner for the MSA by contributing administrative capacity, legal counsel, established procurement policies, grant and project management experience, and significant cash flow. The County's MSA was the first of its kind in scope and scale and Tuolumne County has become a leader among other rural, public lands counties modeling how counties can be proactive in forest management.

Results: To date, Tuolumne County has received nearly \$30 million in state and federal funds to treat 22,000 acres of the Stanislaus National Forest. Projects have been focused in two main areas—restoring the Rim Fire burn area and treating high priority areas in the Stanislaus National Forest that have yet to burn—all with the goal of ensuring community, resource and habitat protection and landscape resilience. Utilizing existing NEPA-ready projects and the exemption provided to Counties by SB901, our existing projects are “shovel ready.” We are also collaborating with YSS and the Stanislaus National Forest on the planning and implementation of their SERAL project, a 116,000 large landscape NEPA to improve the resilience of unburned areas in Tuolumne County. Treatments under the County's MSA include mechanical fuel reduction, hand thinning, commercial and pre-commercial thinning, reforestation and installation of hand lines for future prescribed burning. We hire private contractors, often local, to implement these projects, which helps sustain our existing wood products industry while also growing our local workforce.

Replicability: There are now at least 3 other counties, myriad nonprofits, RCDs and other groups that have entered into MSAs with the USFS in California. With clear direction from the USFS Region 5 leadership for forests to work with partners and stakeholders to treat the landscape, the USFS is willing and open to these types of partnerships. Counties have the opportunity to be proactive for the safety of their communities and protection of their resources and landscapes.

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