



Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG) Joint Powers Authority Agenda

STAFF REPORT

To: ESCOG Joint Powers Authority
From: Kristen Pfeiler, ESCOG staff
Subject: Wildfire Coordinator Report
Meeting date: October 22, 2025
Attachments: None

SUSTAINABLE RECREATION AND ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator:

Staff is working to build capacity to support the Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator and strengthen relationships with partners leveraging Inyo National Forest (INF) Liaison Funding and CAL FIRE County Coordinator funding. This includes:

- Meeting monthly with INF to identify project priorities and gaps/solutions to implementation.
- Attending ESSRP meeting on 9/8/25 and 10/6/25.
- Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance development
- Biomass utilization planning
- Riparian and community fuel reduction planning
- Grant writing and management: Staff, with assistance from Inyo PMO, submitted two grants for CALFIRE Prevention solicitation through Inyo County; ESCOG received the Community Wildfire Defense Grant - \$4.6M

1. Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance development

The ESWA has been undergoing a concerted planning effort since November 2024 to better organize to create regional readiness to receive larger scale funding and our ability to implement effectively. The ESWA is recognized by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy as a "ready landscape", which considers whether our region has the capacity and priorities developed to be eligible for large-scale investment. This current planning effort is to ensure that we have those things in place to attract that investment and execute it.

Staff is co-facilitating the Projects Subcommittee in partnership with Tracy Misiewicz from Whitebark Institute through the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance. This subcommittee is developing an updated regional project list and associated map that aligns and integrates with the CA Wildfire Taskforce Dashboard and communicates regional priorities to funders and across partners in the Alpine, Mono, and Inyo county region.

This Subcommittee met twice in August (14th and 28th) to inform the development of the regional project list. Our goal with this list is to create a living tool that identifies and communicates regional priorities while actively moving projects through the pipeline—leveraging resources, revealing gaps, and enabling us to plan, fund, implement, and maintain efforts more effectively. We aim to build a project list, map, and dashboard that serves a wide range of needs: supporting legislative advocacy, aligning grant applications, coordinating work on the ground, strengthening strategic capacity, and giving residents both hope and clear opportunities for engagement.

What's the vision here? With the state moving toward regional block grants and emphasizing regional decision-making, it's becoming increasingly important that we speak with one strategic voice. We can do this by building these regional tools (a shared project list, map, and dashboard) that give us clarity on shared priorities and provide practical ways to collaborate. These tools allow each partner to advance their own programs while knowing how and when to work together to create meaningful impact for our region.

Other collaboratives are doing this very well. Programs like the Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program, the Butte County Collaborative Group, and the North Coast Resource Partnership inspired our approach and provided models we can learn from to build something equally impactful here.

The Subcommittee reviewed different models of these regional priority lists around the state and gravitated toward the San Bernadino Mountains Regional Priority Plan, developed by the Inland Empire Resource Conservation through their Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program. Staff met with the IERCD to learn the backend and are using this plan as a template. Mammoth Lakes Tourism and Public Access Foundation is providing technical expertise to help build this system and create the associated map and dashboard.

Staff presented this plan to the larger ESWA group on 9/18/25 and will provide a live demo during the next Projects Subcommittee meeting on 10/14/25 and the next ESWA general meeting on 10/16/25 to gather feedback.

Concurrently, the ESWA Communications Subcommittee has been tasked with revamping the ESWA website to provide better communication across agencies and organizations using funds from the Inyo County Coordinator grant. For now, the focus will be on backend, interagency resources for information sharing and communication. In the future, this Subcommittee will advance a public-facing side for information sharing and community resources, which the Mono County Coordinator grant has money to support.

The ESWA Governance Subcommittee has been looking at different models around the state, specifically how other collaboratives are organizing and making decisions. The larger ESWA group voted to move forward with a modified consensus model and will give more input during the next ESWA general meeting on 10/16/25.

2. Biomass Utilization Working Group

Partners across the Eastern Sierra are coming together to align years of independent biomass efforts into a coordinated regional strategy. Supported by the California Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation, this planning effort aims to close critical gaps in biomass utilization, transforming a significant bottleneck into a key driver of wildfire resilience, forest health, and sustainable local economies. Based on previous studies in 2014 and 2021, TSS Consultants along with Whitebark Institute and Inyo National Forest, concluded that about 30,000 bone-dry tons of woody material would be practically available through the ESCCRP and nearby wildfire resilience and forest health projects. This assessment opened the viability of a bioenergy facility to process that amount of material. Seven locations across Mono County were assessed: Lee Vining Substation, Pumice Valley Landfill, Rush Creek Powerhouse in June Lake, GC Forest Products in Mammoth Lakes, Casa Diablo Substation, Airport Industrial Park, and Tom's Place Substation. Criteria for site selection included: adequate space, flat topography, access to nearby electrical substation, and visual impact (TSS, 2022).

Staff assisted with facilitation prep of two working group meetings, one on 8/6/25 and one on 10/3/25. A landing page for these efforts has now been created on the ESCOG website: <https://escog.ca.gov/biomass-utilization>

On 8/6/25, we learned the results of a site assessment and feedstock supply analysis needed to move forward with a bioenergy facility. During this meeting, Fred Tornatore with TSS Consultants, the company hired through the Mono County USFS Wood Innovations Grant (\$600k from 2023 through 2027) to do the pre-development work for this facility, conveyed that the Casa Diablo site adjacent to the Ormat geothermal plant was the optimal location to site the facility. However, at the second Biomass Working Group meeting on 10/3/25, Tornatore informed us that due to costly and constrained access to this site during the winter, they have pivoted to assessing whether the Airport borrow pit site on Inyo NF land is a better location. This is not a final decision.

Bioenergy Pre-development Tasks for TSS Consultants include:

- Select potential bioenergy developer (West Biofuels) and work with them to:
- Develop site control
- Develop feedstock procurement plan and implement agreement/contracts w/feedstock suppliers
- Interconnection and Bioenergy Market Adjusting Tariff (BioMAT) Power Purchase Agreement with Southern CA Edison.

- Preliminary civil engineering and design
- CEQA/NEPA review
- Land use and air quality permitting
- Community and regulatory agency outreach and support
- Project management
- Construct bioenergy facility

3. Eastern Sierra Riparian Resilience Working Group

The Eastside Riparian Working Group is an informal collaboration of agencies, tribes, and local partners focused on treating streambeds that often act as the primary carriers of wildfire into communities. Historically, restoration and fuel reduction work in riparian areas has been slowed by complex permitting requirements. With the Governor's Proclamation suspending CEQA and certain permits, we now have a unique opportunity to advance these high-risk sites to shovel-ready status. The project specifications for each site will adhere to the requirements outlined in the Environmental Protection Plan (EPP) associated with this streamlining process. Applications are due by December 31, 2025. Implementation needs to begin by October 2026 and must be completed within two years after starting and five years if the proposal is submitted by a state agency and/or is funded through certain state grants. Both CA Dept of Fish and Wildlife along with Lahontan Waterboard have been involved in the planning efforts to help us interpret the EPP and strategize the best permitting pathway for each site, as not all sites and treatments needed are allowable or best achieved under the EPP.

Site Visits:

The working group got together for another round of site visits on 10/2/25 to define treatments and locations for Tom's Place, Sunny Slopes, Crowley Lake, SNARL, and Mammoth Creek.

A specific site visit for the Bishop area is being planned that will link together project needs from the pre-development work that have been happening around Bishop for the past year.

Application Progress:

With site visits completed for areas south of Big Pine, CAL FIRE and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power are coordinating to draft and submit the first proposal for consideration under the EPP. Getting feedback on this 'pilot' will provide us with a good template to use for the remaining applications.

Because the EPP pathway comes with a relatively short timeframe for implementation, figuring out potential strategies for that now helps determine which organization should submit the application for each site. Many of the sites in the Owens Valley may be possible for CAL FIRE to integrate into their winter operations. As we go north, we will need to secure other partnerships and funding to implement. Whitebark is exploring the possibility of using some of the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program funding to plan and implement certain high-priority sites.

Areas north of Mammoth Lakes are being integrated into the West Mono Basin Project Planning efforts, as appropriate. Staff continue to work with Southern CA Edison on parcels in the Lee Vining and Lundy Canyon drainages.

Partnerships have now expanded to include federal agencies because it is common for these riparian corridors to cross multiple jurisdictions. Even though the federal parcels aren't applicable for the state's EPP process, when it comes to implementation, we want to approach this in a coordinated manner for optimal community protection.

Communication:

Staff presented an overview of this riparian project to the Inyo-Mono Resource Conservation District on 9/2/25. They showed interest in participating and may be able to sponsor a project with capacity assistance.

Staff shared this project as an update during the quarterly Inyo County/Tribal Emergency Management collaborative meeting on 8/29/25. This project fit well into their discussions on preparing for flood impacts. The Tribes are supportive of this project and want to be involved in the planning process.

Next Steps:

- LADWP and/or CAL FIRE submit pilot application
- The group reviews the pilot application feedback and generates a template to use for the remainder of the project sites
- The group determines who is going to submit each application
- Schedule and conduct site visits for remaining proposed areas

- Gather input from communities/Tribes
- Submit applications by 12/31/25
- Outline a coordinated and strategic implementation strategy

California Jobs First Initiative:

Staff attended the Cross-Industry Sector Shindig on 9/12/25 in Bishop, hosted by MLTPA, ESCOG, and Mother Lode Job Training. There are so many connection points coming out of this Sierra Jobs First Initiative. One concrete example is that during the planning and development of the Community Wildfire Defense Grant, staff met with the leaders of the Sierra Jobs First Composting Initiative, which became a critical piece in making the full cycle of this CWDG program viable. Now, as both efforts move toward implementation, we have a powerful opportunity to partner, leveraging our distinct capacities and strengths to create a truly synergistic outcome. While my current work is focused on wildfire, these efforts go beyond that and ultimately create and sustain the systems that contribute to a vibrant life here, fostering safe communities, healthy landscapes, and a functioning local economy.

Funding Updates:

1. CAL FIRE Wildfire Prevention Grants 2025:

Funds projects in and near threatened communities to improve public health and safety while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Grants of up to \$950,000 are available for hazardous fuels reduction, planning and education for wildfire prevention.

Proposals for this solicitation were submitted on 8/6/25 and reviewed by our San Bernadino Unit Grant Specialists. It could be feasible that the State concludes their review process this calendar year. We anticipate hearing back on several proposals submitted from our region:

- Mammoth Lakes Fire Dept: A grapple truck and crew to streamline and expand defensible space vegetation removal that could potentially be used across the region.
- Whitebark Institute: Fuel reduction around the Ormat geothermal plant to reduce community wildfire risk.
- Mono County Air Curtain Burner: A portable air curtain burner to be managed by Public Works, providing disposal solutions for community hazardous fuel removal.
- Mono County Community Wildfire Protection Plan Update: The Mono CWPP from 2019 needs to be updated with current risk models and projects.
- Inyo Community Fuel Reduction Vouchers: Green waste vouchers for use at Inyo County Landfills, continuing a successful pilot program.
- Inyo County Fuel Reduction in Parks and Campgrounds: Crews to assist Public Works in reducing the overgrowth of vegetation from the last few wet years.
- 40 Acres Emergency Access and Egress Route: Planning and implementation of a new egress route on Ocean View Dr.

2. Sierra Nevada Conservancy Wildfire & Forest Resilience Directed Grant Program:

Provides a total of \$10 million in grants for projects that reduce wildfire risk and create more resilient forest landscapes and watersheds in the Sierra-Cascade region. The primary focus is on projects that protect people and communities and are ready to be implemented.

- The California Deer Association submitted a proposal for fuel reduction on White Fir Ridge within the ESCCRP footprint.
- Whitebark Institute began the proposal process for riparian work in the Lone Pine and Three Creeks areas, but due to the timing of the CEQA streamlining process and these projects needing to be shovel-ready in time for submission coupled with more conversations needed with landowners to allow SNC access to these sites for 25 years for monitoring per their grant guidelines, this application was put on hold.

3. US Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grant - \$4.6M Grant Award

The Eastern Sierra Council of Governments has been awarded \$4.6 million through the US Forest Service Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) to implement a dual-county community hazardous fuel removal program. This represents a milestone in our region's wildfire resilience strategy.

What is the CWDG?

The CWDG program, created through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, helps communities and Tribes plan for and reduce wildfire risk while putting the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy into action. It's a \$1-billion national competitive program that prioritizes communities that:

- Face high or very high wildfire hazard potential,
- Are low-income or underserved, or
- Have been impacted by a severe disaster that increased wildfire risk.

Funds can be used to: 1) Develop and revise Community Wildfire Protection Plans, or 2) Implement projects described in a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that is less than ten years old.

Read the press release here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/newsroom/releases/usda-invests-58-community-projects-reduce-wildfire-risk>

Grant and Program Development

This award is the result of years of regional collaboration through the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance and updated Community Wildfire Protection Plans. ESCOG's proposal, one of 58 selected nationwide out of 573 applications, was shaped through broad input from both counties, Tribes, Fire Safe Councils, and agency partners, reflecting the strong partnerships already in place to implement this program.

What This Program Does

The Eastern Sierra Communities Wildfire Defense Program pulls together existing resources to create a comprehensive, closed-loop system for community hazardous fuel removal. Funds will support ESCOG program staff salaries and travel across both counties, purchase fuel reduction equipment and mitigation software, contract Inyo and Mono County Public Works crews and fuel removal services, fund the construction of a composting site in each county, and contract local fuel reduction crews.

Here's what the Program looks like in practice:

- **Residents connect to the Program through Firewise/Fire Safe Councils** who identify neighborhood priorities and organize cleanup events. Each of the 34 identified communities will host two cleanup events per year (340 total).
- **Partners** work alongside them to provide education and 1,250 home assessments with tailored recommendations, piloting mitigation software, that prioritize low-cost, high-impact improvements.
- **Local crews** assist residents who can't do the work themselves, ensuring equitable access to defensible space support, treating 200 high-risk homes.
- **County Public Works** departments chip and haul 9,500 tons of woody material produced through community cleanup events and compost the green waste, strategically embedding that work into County operations so it lasts.
- **Fire departments and CAL FIRE** follow up with defensible space inspections to reinforce safe practices and long-term maintenance.

Why It Matters

This grant represents a turning point. We've heard for years that capacity to remove community hazardous fuels were one of our biggest challenges, but until now, we simply haven't had the capacity or infrastructure to match the scale of the problem. Residents want to do this work and are stepping up, understanding what it means to take responsibility for their safety and for one another, and that energy has been driving collaborative efforts from the ground up. This grant gives us the capacity to build upon all the groundwork our partners and communities have laid and finally connect the pieces into a lasting, coordinated system. Every resident now has a clear pathway to make their property safer, improve their community's survivability during the next wildfire, and support the local crews and programs, turning hazardous fuels into valuable community resources.

The Eastern Sierra Communities Wildfire Defense Program accelerates measurable, on-the-ground actions that increase a home's survivability. It provides the staff and infrastructure to create a complete green waste hauling and processing system within sustainable institutions. It invests in local workforce by creating sustainable, year-round work for local crews and establishing career pathways through Cerro Coso internships. It adds to the vibrancy of our region by providing biomass disposal solutions (air curtain burning, chipping, composting) that improve the environment and generate economic value.