

# Mountain Democrat

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## Mountain Counties invites mixed panel to speak

Members of Mountain Counties Water Resources Association and the Association of California Water Agencies met jointly in Placerville earlier this month at the El Dorado Irrigation District conference room in Placerville.

The two organizations held their respective business meeting in the morning. The afternoon was devoted to a three-hour forum of experts on “The Future of the Sierra Nevada Watershed” for members and guests.

There is some urgency to the topic as the Delta Stewardship Council, created by state legislation in 2009, is in the final stages of developing its environmental impact report/environmental impact statement for the Delta Plan. The Delta Plan is due to be adopted by Dec. 31.

The two co-equal goals of the Delta Plan: Restoration of the Delta ecosystem and statewide water reliability, harbor serious concerns for upstream users in the mountain counties. They are worried about the risk of losing their senior water rights that would have negative consequences for local economies, including agriculture. They are also anxious about the prospect of having to raise water rates for their customers to fund ecosystem repair in the Delta and transfer water to the Central Valley and Southern California.

In a nutshell, mountain counties water resource managers are fearful that they will lose control of their future.

Mountain Counties Executive Director John Kingsbury put together a panel of seven speakers with diverse perspectives to address issues relating to water management. “It’s important that we hear from all the interested parties,” he said.

The issues covered: Managing wildland fire, meadow restoration, biomass projects, climate change, logging timber, and fiscal and legal challenges.

The speakers were: Kim Carr, Sustainable Initiatives coordinator for Sierra Nevada Conservancy; Chad Hanson, PhD, director of the John Muir Project; Barry Hill, U.S. Department of Agriculture regional hydrologist for the Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region; Ed Murphy, manager of Resource Inventory Systems for Sierra Pacific Industries; Karla Nemeth, outreach and communications manager for the Bay Delta Conservation Plan of California Natural Resources Agency; Craig Thomas, Sierra Forest Legacy executive director; and Calaveras County Supervisor Steve Wilensky. Modesto Bee reporter John Holland was moderator.

### **Kim Carr, Sierra Nevada Conservancy**

Carr said at the Sept. 9 meeting the Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency in the Natural Resources Department that covers the area from the Oregon border two-thirds down the state. Its mission is to “initiate, encourage, and support efforts that improve the environmental, economic and social well being of the Sierra Nevada Region, its communities and the citizens of California.”

She commented, “People are tired of the old fights.”

The conservancy provides grants, loans and technical assistance for programs that increase tourism and recreation, conserve and restore physical, cultural, archaeological, historical and living resources, preserve working landscapes, reduce the risk of natural disasters such as wildfire, protect and improve water and air quality, assist the regional economy, and enhance public use and enjoyment of public lands.

On Sept. 27, the conservancy will issue a request for proposals for \$5 million of Proposition 84 monies under its “Healthy Forests” grant program. The focus will be on reducing catastrophic fires.

“The condition of the headwaters is important,” she said later in the discussion.

An additional \$5 million will be granted in 2012-13 for ranches and agricultural lands in the Sierra Nevada.

### **Chad Hanson, John Muir Project**

Chad Johnson, an ecologist who is a research associate in the Plant and Environmental Sciences Department at UC Davis, helped develop the John Muir Project. The project was formed in 1997 under the Earth Island Institute, which is headquartered in Cedar Ridge, east of Grass Valley.

The goal of the Earth Island Institute “is to ensure ecological management of our National Forests by ending the federal timber sales program and eliminating its system of perverse economic and political incentives that undermine science and threaten native wildlife and forest ecosystems.”

Johnson has published scientific studies on fire history, fire intensity patterns and climate, and wildlife species dependant on post-fire habitat.

As executive director of the John Muir Project, he is “dedicated to ensuring ecological management of our federal public forestlands.”

Hanson said that prevailing assumptions are wrong with respect to fire and western United States forests and they are contradicted by scientific evidence. He spoke about the benefits of high-severity fires, saying “native biodiversity among higher plants and vertebrate species is highest in conifer stands that have burned at high severity within the recent past and have not been salvage logged.” He cited the black-backed woodpecker as one of a number of species that depend upon high-severity fire patches.

#### **Barry Hill, hydrologist, U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region**

The Pacific Southwest Region, also called Region 5, is responsible for the 18 national forests — 20 million acres — in California, plus assisting state and private forest landowners in California, Hawaii and U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands. Hill works out of the region’s headquarters in Vallejo.

He emphasized that the Forest Service is a multiple-use agency. He said that one of the goals of the Forest Service is to “conserve, manage and protect the waters in the forest.” Ecosystem restoration is one approach to that goal.

Hill focused his comments on meadow restoration in the Sierra Nevada as a significant component of conservation.

Fires, climate change and other activities have eroded the alpine meadows, lowering their capacity to hold water.

Improving the ability of the meadows to sequester water prevents early runoff in winter and spring.

By raising the water tables in the meadows, is available for release in late summer and early fall when farmers, ranchers and water agencies need it most.

Meadow restoration also discourages invasive weeds and provides better habitat for birds, fish and animals.

Hill also talked about the benefits of the trees in the forest intercepting precipitation and absorbing carbon. He encouraged visiting the meadows and forests and using them as outdoor classrooms in education.

#### **Ed Murphy, Sierra Pacific Industries**

Murphy said he had been working on a project and did not have time to prepare a statement. He made up for it in the question-and-answer session.

In response to questions, Murphy said that 80 percent of biomass is white fir. “White fir can’t handle drought cycles,” he said. “Resiliency is important to rapid change.” He advocated for converting the white fir forests to pine trees.

He said the forests are carrying more than capacity. “Inventory is now at 25-27 billion board feet.” More is growing than is being harvested. “The system is teetering.”

“It took 80 years to convert the Sierra Nevada due to fire suppression. Our ecosystem is out of whack,” he said. He also mentioned that “large scale erosion created the Central Valley.”

#### **Karla Nemeth, Natural Resources Agency**

When Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Gerald Meral as secretary of the Natural Resources Agency, Meral hired Karla Nemeth to coordinate the ongoing Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), which is being overseen by a management committee of 24 state and federal agency members, environmental and conservation organizations, local water agencies and other interest groups.

The BDCP began in 2006 and is due to wind up in 2013 with a Record of Decision and Notice of Decision. The plan would be implemented over the next 50 years.

The BDCP has the same co-equal goals as the Delta Plan that is underway through the Delta Stewardship Council: Ecosystem restoration and water supply reliability.

The BDCP is being developed in compliance with the Federal Endangered Species Act and the California Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) Act. The Delta NCCP is a program of the state Department of Fish and Game, which is also under the Natural Resources Agency.

Nemeth said the Bay Delta Conservation Plan is currently undergoing a program environmental impact report that will provide the basis for the issuance of endangered species permits for the operation of the state and federal water projects. She said the impetus for the plan is to get past the wrangling and litigation that results from listing individual species by providing for regional or area-wide protection of habitats.

If the DFG determines that the BDCP meets the co-equal goals, the BDCP will be incorporated into the Delta Plan.

Nemeth said California needs to diversify its water supplies and build flexible facilities and conveyance systems. “We need to replumb the system,” she said.

Referring to the upstream watersheds, Nemeth said, “The mountain range is way more important than anyone’s agenda.”

### **Craig Thomas, Sierra Forest Legacy**

Craig Thomas co-founded Sierra Forest Legacy in 1992. As executive director, he oversees all the legacy's programmatic work and coordinates its Forest Conservation Program. Originally called the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign, Thomas said it has 86 member groups, including The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, Friends of the River and the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center. Members are working on 12 collaborative projects. The main office is in Garden Valley.

As a former executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity for many years, Thomas was active in filing lawsuits on behalf of endangered species and forest practices that virtually shut down the logging industry in California. Now he said he is less inclined to use litigation. "Our best hope is collaboration," he said.

Thomas said he has traveled all over the Sierra Nevada. "I don't see health and resilience in the forests. The most dangerous thing is the absence of appropriate fire." He called for a revision of forest plans that he said are 20 years old with updated ones based on science and a multiple suite of objectives.

He said the forests need to be "anchored by biodiversity."

### **Steve Wilensky, Calaveras County**

Wilensky was elected to the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors in 2003. He is owner and operator of Humbug Creek Farm and Cider Mill in Glencoe. Wilensky described Calaveras County as "poverty-stricken and hard-pressed." He said, "We've lost one town; we have nine left. Eighty-eight percent of our kids are Title I (a federal designation that qualifies children for programs such as free school lunch.) Meth is our biggest export."

He talked about the blaming and divisiveness that have characterized relations among environmentalists, foresters, water managers, business owners and government leaders. The result was that nobody won, he said.

Wilensky is a member of the Upper Mokelumne Watershed Council and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. With respect to forest restoration and water stewardship, he said a new look is required, one that is cross-jurisdictional. "We need an 'all lands approach,' a Sierra-wide plan on a watershed basis using adaptive management and monitoring, where the funding and work is done across agencies."

He cited the prospect of a cogeneration plant that could be installed in Calaveras County. The plant would take the fuel build up out of the forests and convert it to biomass, protecting the forests from catastrophic fire and contributing to the local economy. "We have to look at the environmental, economic and social aspects of what we do," he said.

He pointed out that while only 3 percent of people live in the Sierra, 90-95 percent of East Bay's water comes from the Mokelumne.

"The relationship of the Sierra as a whole is important to downstream users, and all of the world potentially. We've got a lot of work to do," said Wilensky.

"The health of the Sierra watersheds is critical to the health of the Delta," said Kingsbury afterward.

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