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Panelists Brett Storey with Placer County, Ed Smith from The Nature Conservancy, Andy Fecko with the Placer County Water Agency, Michael Woodbridge from the U.S. Forest Service and Barnie Gyant of the U.S. Forest Service, from left, led the discussion, A Look Into the Future for California's Watersheds, at the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association symposium Nov. 8. Democrat photo by Dawn Hodson

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Symposium talks benefits of partnership in watershed restoration

By **Dawn Hodson**

“We all think of zones of responsibility. But that doesn’t work any more.” — Andy Fecko, director of strategic affairs for the Placer County Water Agency

Creating partnerships was the theme of a Nov. 8 symposium put on by Mountain Counties Water Resources Association at the Ridge Golf Course and Events Center in Auburn.

Titled, A Look Into the Future for California’s Watersheds, Dave Eggerton, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, began by providing an overview of what the symposium would cover.

Emphasizing that “partnerships are there for the taking,” Eggerton cited the upcoming panel discussion of the French Meadows Restoration Project as a successful example where different agencies have come together to restore a watershed.

Helge Eng, a deputy director of resource management for Cal Fire, then kicked off the panel discussion noting that the forests in the state and elsewhere in the country are overstocked due to fires being suppressed for the last 100 years. The climate is also changing, Eng added, noting that it’s becoming warmer, windier and drier. And while the excess timber needs to be removed, Eng stressed that it needs to be sold at a profit in order to incentivize private industry to want to remove and process it.

Saying that partnerships are essential in protecting the watersheds, Eng described a long list of tools that can be used to reduce the wildfire risk and restore the watershed including land-use planning, retrofitting existing homes, enacting building codes for new homes, evacuation planning, power line clearance, utility wildfire mitigation plans, education and enforcement, vegetation management and the prescribed burning and thinning of forests.

Acknowledging that many of these tools won’t necessarily be popular, he said the public may need to accept some impacts in the short-term in order to achieve

certain long-term goals. Eng said we need more open forests to limit wildfires, noting that he was at the 2013 Rim Fire and saw how close it came to Hetch Hetchy Reservoir.

Eng said the governor recently authorized spending \$200 million a year over the next five years on the watershed. The fire service has also committed to treating 1 million acres a year to reach fire resilient conditions, which he admitted is quite a commitment.

Monitoring will also take account of how effective the treatments are, how much smoke is put into the air and to what extent the treatment reduces the risk of more mega fires.

Barnie Gyant, a deputy regional forester with the U.S. Forest Service, spoke next saying the agency has been working on improving forest health for 10 years and in the process has signed several memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with different groups in order to carry out these efforts more efficiently.

Gyant said his agency has already spent \$504 million in 2017 and \$330 million in 2018 on fire suppression in California.

Transitioning to the panel assembled to discuss the French Meadows Forest Restoration Project, Gyant called it a case study in partnering.

Involving some 28,000 acres, the project is designed to restore the health of the forest and reduce the risk of high-severity wildfires.

Agencies involved include the U.S. Forest Service, which manages most of the land within the project area; the 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 the University of California at Merced.

District ranger with the U.S. Forest Service and panelist Michael Woodbridge noted that in 2014 the King Fire burned more than 97,000 acres in El Dorado County, including into the French Meadow drainage. In an effort to prevent such a fire from happening again, the Forest Service partnered-up in 2015 and came up with a plan.

That plan included The Nature Conservancy assisting the American River Conservancy to purchase 10,000 acres in the American River headwaters. Later

the Tahoe National Forest and Placer County Water Agency signed a MOU and became partners in the project.

Panelist Andy Fecko, who is the director of strategic affairs for the Placer County Water Agency, said “We all think of zones of responsibility. But that doesn’t work any more,” adding that the King Fire was the agency’s wake-up call given they have a billion dollars of infrastructure in the area. He went on to describe the difficulty of keeping hydropower operations running after the fire due to sediment and downed trees.

Ed Smith, a regional ecologist with The Nature Conservancy and panelist, went on to describe the project as a big experiment, which he termed a success. It made the watershed more resilient to change and involved partnership governance, innovative finance, restoration contracting and forest water research, he concluded.

Brett Storey, panelist and principal management analyst for Placer County, said Placer County got involved in order to reduce the chance of more large fires.

In the course of the project more than 3,000 acres of the American River headwaters were restored and donated to the Tahoe National Forest for addition to the Granite Chief Wilderness. To date the American River Conservancy has reduced forest fuels on approximately 375 acres, restored 13 acres of meadow and more than 30 stream crossings. Seven miles of new trail has also been established with funding from the Forest Service, state of California and private donors.

In 2018 the Forest Service approved the French Meadows Project with implementation beginning in 2019. In total, 12,000 acres were treated 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

In 2019 the plan included treating more than 2,000 acres, bringing more than 3.5 million board-feet of timber to a local mill and more than 10,000 tons of biomass to a local renewable energy facility with revenues from both being used to partially fund the project. In addition, more than 7,000 acres will undergo a prescribed burn to be managed by The Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service, including 200 acres in 2019.

Restoration work is expected to continue through 2021.

The overall budget for the project is estimated between \$16 to \$19 million if the partners do all the work, less \$3 million in revenue from timber sales. Of that

amount the partners have raised at least \$7 million from their own funding and grant awards.

Also speaking at the event was California State Sen. Brian Dahle, who discussed his efforts to educate the public about the value of protecting the watershed. One piece of legislation he said he is working on would establish a certificate for insurance companies testifying that a person has hardened their home against fire.

It was also announced that Mountain Counties Water Resources Association is the receipt of a grant for \$179,021.53 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The grant will be used for fuel reduction and biomass management strategies designed to benefit the forest and watersheds within the Panther Creek, Bear River and Cole Creek watersheds of the Eldorado National Forest. Mountain Counties Water Resources Association will be working on the project in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service and Jacobson James & Associates. Jacobson and James is the firm that developed and submitted the grant application.