

# A NEW STRATEGIC YSS PLAN TO CREATE ENHANCED FOREST RESILIENCY FOR THE THREATS OF WILDFIRES, DROUGHT, INSECTS, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## INTRODUCTION

With full respect for many years of dedicated state, federal, and private efforts, the fact is that the status quo approach to forest management is not solving the problem. It is not significantly reducing the risk of devastating forest wildfires or the widespread impacts of droughts, bark beetles, and loss of native species. Equally important, it is not reducing the fire's greenhouse gas emissions, which are currently more than offsetting all the other State's reduction efforts. **All that's being done, is not sufficient to allow forest management to get ahead of the problem.**

**Cutting-edge forest treatments need to be applied extensively across enough of the landscape to make a meaningful difference.** Science-based selective logging treatments can open up dense, overstocked forest stands. Biomass fuel removal can greatly diminish the tons per acre of woody material that burns so intensely in wildfires. Prescribed burning is pivotal to reducing surface and ladder fuels that affect the rate and intensity of wildfire spread under most conditions.

The "best available science" can be applied to forest treatments. But there are two significant interrelated constraints. The U.S. Forest Service lacks enough staff capacity to do all the projects it desires to see planned and implemented. And even with historic increases in State funding, the existing State programs and processes were not designed to efficiently address the nature and magnitude of today's forest health crisis. Consequently, the current piece-meal and fragmented State funding approach is precluding immediately using these funds in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Bottom line is that the State can immediately advance towards its own goals through funding high-performing collaboratives, such as the YSS's partnership with Tuolumne County and the Stanislaus National Forest, that have shovel-ready projects only lacking funding to implement.

With the additional \$500 million in State funds that the Governor requested be released to achieve State wildfire resilience/forest health goals, meaningful progress can begin now if the State provides the block grants that enable continuous work across critical landscapes. Well-established high-performing collaboratives do not currently have anywhere near enough funds to implement shovel-ready large-scale projects to augment the work being achieved by federal agency efforts.

## **WHY SHOULD THE STATE OR PRIVATE INTERESTS INVEST SIGNIFICANTLY IN THIS PROPOSED YSS STRATEGIC PLAN OF LARGE LANDSCAPE RESILIENCY EFFORTS?**

### **Co-Benefits:**

Every dollar invested in strategic forest resiliency treatments will almost certainly reduce future federal and state costs for fire suppression, forest restoration treatments, watershed restoration work, rebuilding of communities, infrastructure, etc. Fire suppression and post-fire recovery are extremely expensive; much more expensive than proper forest management. A study completed by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission estimated that the Rim Fire cost approximately \$800 million in damages. **Pay less now or pay much more later.**

Climate change is happening more quickly and with more severe consequences than earlier climate models predicted; it is being compounded by the cumulative, additive negative impacts of synergism – of factors overlapping and aligning to exacerbate the problem. Longer fire seasons combined with climate-changed induced more-frequent severe wind events, amplified by hotter extreme weather temperatures, both add to the problems of already over-stretched fire suppression forces and vastly increase the GHG emissions, creating even more future risks.

**Every major wildfire that is avoided and thus every restoration and recovery project that reduces wildfire risk contributes to a wide range of public benefits.**

**Reducing high levels of unhealthy wildfire smoke and reducing released carbon into the atmosphere jointly contribute toward state goals to reduce GHG emissions and address climate change.** Reducing unhealthy smoke that drifts across the Central Valley or that stagnates for a week or longer as bad air choking Bay Area residents is a pivotal goal for public health, for environmental values, and for preventing unneeded deaths of those with breathing difficulties or high health risk.

**Perhaps this final point is what may matter most:** The Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite, and other public lands in the region are incredibly important and precious to local region residents and those who are employed on these vast public lands. But these iconic lands are also the “backyard vacation destinations” and memory-makers for vast numbers of people who live in the Bay Area and Central Valley. **Reducing massive, destructive fires and widespread drought effects in the precious forests of the YSS region means a great deal to millions of Californians. What happens to the YSS region matters to millions of people. The Strategic Proposal aims to build on that public attention to show a path forward.**

## **WHY IS YSS ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF INNOVATIVE STAKEHOLDER ACTION?**

The Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions forest stakeholder collaborative group was formed in 2010 to partner with federal and state agencies to reduce destructive wildfires, to restore already degraded burned areas, and to serve as an example of how a steadfast focus on actions that have broad stakeholder agreement can result in outcomes that benefit all interests.

In 2014 YSS led successful negotiations with timber industry and environmental interests to achieve a highly praised solution that resulted in fire salvage wood to be removed after the Rim Fire while protecting important wildlife habitat and environmental values. In 2015 YSS similarly resolved a controversial reforestation plan for the Rim Fire that ended up with support from all local and regional interests. Over the past six years YSS has secured over \$23,000,000 in State grant funds to significantly increase fuel reduction, tree planting, fuel break construction, prep work for prescribed burning, and other highly important forest treatments within the Stanislaus National Forest, which are the headwaters of both the Tuolumne and Stanislaus Rivers that provide the water supply for much of the Bay Area and hundreds of thousand acres of farmland.

The six members of the YSS Leadership Team individually hold highly diverse political and conservation views. Yet along with an extremely effective facilitator, the Leadership Team, with the support of its broadly diverse membership, has consistently reached science-based, consensus agreements that make a meaningful, measurable difference on the ground with the least amount of controversy. In 2019 the Leadership Team handed the Stanislaus Forest staff a draft strategy for what the Forest Service then molded into the highly touted SERAL forest landscape project in the Stanislaus River watershed.

That SERAL large landscape plan includes 92,000 acres of national forest lands and 25,000 acres of private lands that in total are being assessed for selective logging areas, public safety planning, watershed values, recreational and scenic protection, and action-focused treatments that will produce high levels of wood products, local jobs, economic ripple effects, and social equity benefits.

The SERAL project plan is currently poised to be finalized within months. But a plan without assured funding to implement the needed work is just good intentions on paper. In addition, the YSS Leadership Team is aware that even if substantial implementation funding is gained for a significant portion of the SERAL project, that still leaves a huge funding need for all of the Rim Fire restoration treatments that gained NEPA approval years ago, but as of yet are not funded or implemented.

**This PROPOSAL spells out a new approach to getting ahead of the forest health problems** of accumulated fuels, more frequent drought stress, increased incidence of bark beetles, loss of biodiversity, public expectations for increased recreation, watershed threats, and the elephant in the room of a changing climate across the West that greatly exacerbates all the other pressing ecological or forest management threats.

**SUMMARY**

**The Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions requests grant funding of \$40,250,000 to be spent over five years to significantly increase pace and scale to implement NEPA-ready projects, plan the next large landscape project, increase administrative and project management capacity, conduct outreach and education, and create a robust workforce training program.**

Within the 3/4 of the Stanislaus National Forest’s non-Wilderness portion that YSS aims to actively restore - and combined with associated private forest lands - YSS, Tuolumne County, and the Forest Service collectively aim to achieve the strategic implementation of resilience and forest health treatments for 15,000 acres in the next 5 years.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Cost (5-Years)</b>
1) Implementation of at least 15,000 acres of High-Priority Fuel Management Features, Forest Thinning, Biomass Removal, Prescribed Burning, and Reforestation	\$26,000,000
2) Capacity to Administer and Implement Projects	\$6,000,000
3) Planning Next Large-Landscape Across Federal and SRA Lands	\$6,000,000
4) Workforce Training	\$2,000,000
5) Community Outreach & Education	\$250,000
<b>Total 5-Year Cost</b>	<b>\$40,250,000</b>

**BACKGROUND – Goals and Shovel-Ready Projects**

The Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions collaborative has identified eight key interrelated goals to improve resiliency of our region.

- Local communities and public, private, and tribal lands will be more resilient to high-severity wildfires due to forest restoration treatments.

- Improved forest health and resilience will lessen threats from drought, insects, and disease and better able to capture and sequester carbon.
- Science-based logging and biomass treatments that reduce dense forest conditions will provide socio-economic benefits of wood products and jobs.
- Prescribed fire treatments will be applied at a scale that restores fire ecology benefits across the treated landscape.
- Water quality will be protected, snowpack retention will increase, and degraded meadows will be restored to enhance water resources.
- Habitat will be protected or enhanced for at-risk and focal native wildlife and plant species
- Project actions will be designed to benefit scenic and recreational values.
- Engagement and outreach will gain strong support for forest management and restoration from diverse interests.

**Rim Fire and Complex Fire Reforestation and Restoration NEPA-Ready Projects**

The Stanislaus Forest has many NEPA-ready projects that would move the forest towards the Resiliency goals. The projects are ready when funding becomes available.

<b>Total Acres:</b>		<b>Cost</b>
Reforestation Acres:	16,280	\$68,000,000
Forest Health Thinning Acres:	12,871	\$37,000,000
Prescribed Fire	17,623	\$7,000,000
Project Management, Administration, Equipment & Coordination		\$20,000,000
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<i>Total Expense:</i>		<i>\$132,000,000</i>
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Estimated USFS contribution over 5 years*		\$20,000,000
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<b>TOTAL NEPA-READY PROJECTS UNMET NEED:</b>		<b>\$112,000,000</b>

\* The Forest Service cannot define future budgets or to obligate funds not allocated by Congress. Over the past 8 years, the Forest Service spent tens of millions of dollars on Rim Fire work. Additionally, a Federal HUD grant invested tens of millions of dollars. Looking ahead, \$4,000,000 per year is a realistic estimate for the agency over 5 years.

***SERAL Restoration - NEPA-Ready within Six Months***

As noted, the Stanislaus Forest is completing an EIS process for a 117,000-acre planning area in the South and Middle Fork Stanislaus watersheds. Within the next 6-months, approval of that plan would make “NEPA ready” an additional 38,000 acres of thinning, 11,000 acres of fuel breaks and anchor points, and 17,000 acres of prescribed fire.

<b>Total Acres:</b>		<b>Cost</b>
Forest Health Thinning Acres:	38,000	\$68,000,000
Fuel Management Features	11,000	\$27,500,000
Prescribed Fire	17,000	\$6,500,000
Project Administration, & Coordination		\$18,000,000
<i>Total Expense:</i>		<i>\$120,000,000</i>
Timber Receipts		\$7,500,000
US Forest Service Contribution		\$15,000,000**
<b>TOTAL UNMET NEED:</b>		<b>\$97,500,000</b>

\*\* While additional FS SERAL funding remains to be determined, SERAL is a National Demonstration Project with the engaged support of the highest level of FS leadership. It includes three areas of innovation: 1) Significant utilization of Shared Stewardship through the MSA with Tuolumne County's partnership with YSS; 2) New modelling being developed by a coordinated team from the Regional Forest Service, PSW Research Station and the Rocky Mountain Research Station; 3) possible new NEPA framework.

### ***State Responsibility Area Lands***

On adjacent private lands, the local FireSafe Council has planned and partially funded a series of fuel breaks in and around populated areas that tie into planned projects on Federal lands. These projects collectively reduce the threat to local communities.

**To summarize, the Yosemite Stanislaus Solution, Stanislaus National Forest, and Tuolumne County have thousands of acres of forest health projects that are or will shortly be ready to be implemented.** The goal of YSS is to complete these treatments as soon as funding is available, while simultaneously developing plans for a new large landscape project area within the National Forest and adjacent private lands to keep the pipeline of projects primed. This represents a significant increase in pace and scale. The YSS area is unique in that industry has made available critical components such as local operating mills, a local operating biomass plant, many local forestry operators, and a community college with a forestry program to help train and staff the work force needed to expand capacity both locally and statewide.

In order for YSS to build upon the current level of success that comes from the MSA and YSS's partnership with Tuolumne County and the Forest Service, YSS and the County will need to add capacity in order to achieve the goal of implementing 15,000 acres over the next five years.

To do this, YSS seeks funding for the following:

**1) Project Implementation - Obtain the necessary funding to effectively implement the significantly increased level of resiliency treatments for the first 5 years of work (Phase 1)**

YSS and Tuolumne County, with the support of the Stanislaus National Forest, seeks \$26,000,000 in grant funding from the State to be allocated for project implementation for the two key national forest areas described above (Rim Fire/Complex Fire Restoration and the SERAL project) during the 5-year Phase 1 period across at least 15,000 acres.

**PRIORITIZATION OF SELECTING SPECIFIC PROJECT ACRES AND TREATMENTS:** An arbitrary plan that is not adaptable to the realities of a given year's weather, snowpack, dry spring conditions, wildfire demands, pandemic mandates, or other factors can't force project actions to be successfully completed. YSS, however, in full consultation with Tuolumne County and the Stanislaus Forest staff, will prioritize the selection of treatment areas based upon the following considerations:

- Which treated acres best protect communities at risk, essential infrastructure, key public investments, or high value ecological resources?
- Next, which forest treatments gain the most amount of resiliency benefit when considered by cost vs acre benefits?
- Third, where USFS staff engagement for contract or project administration is necessary, how can scheduling of work best match the agency's needs?
- Last, given all the competing factors and government constraints, competing demands, and unexpected challenges, where can YSS project work achieve the best outcome for not just a short period, but for at least the next 5-10 years.

**SERAL (Thinning, Biomass Removal, Fuel Breaks, Prescribed Burning):** For this highly touted large landscape pilot project, state grant dollars will be strategically applied to implement forest restoration treatments (biomass removal, thinning logging, prescribed burning, mastication of brush, hand-felling) to reduce fuel loading, minimize forest competition for limited water, reduce the risk of high severity wildfires, and better protect critical wildlife habitat. The block grant request aims to apply a portion of the funding as subsidy funding to ensure the viability of biomass removal treatments during the 5-year period. A portion of the SERAL treatments will be offset by receipts from the sale of timber and other products. Federal funds will also fund a significant portion of the treatments on this landscape.

**Rim Fire Restoration (Plantation Thinning, Reforestation, Prescribed Burning):** In the Rim Fire burn area footprint, state funding would enable thinning of tree plantations that were unburned during the Rim Fire and that remain overly dense and at high-risk. Where feasible, follow-up broadcast burning will be done to reduce fire severity risk. While important reforestation treatments have successfully begun the regrowth of devastated areas within the 2013 Rim Fire, thousands of acres of NEPA-approved site preparation, reforestation, and post-planting release treatments are not funded at this time. A portion of the requested State funding would be applied to implement the approved site prep/fuel reduction and reforestation treatments. YSS notes that this one aspect of the envisioned program of work, by itself, has significant potential to enhance biodiversity (restoring lost forest habitat) and to sequester carbon to reduce impacts of GHG emissions.

**Prescribed Burning:** YSS intends to apply a portion of grant funding for a dedicated prescribed fire crew whose priority purpose will be to implement prescribed fire within the two project areas and elsewhere as needed within the Stanislaus National Forest. There is an abundance of areas where prescribed fire is needed, but the USFS has lacked a crew assured of being in place to implement prescribed fire projects.

## **2) Grow capacity to implement a significant level of resiliency treatments**

The estimated cost to administer and implement projects over the next five years is \$6,000,000. This will enable YSS and Tuolumne County to implement a broad range of critical work such as project layout, flagging, and prep work; project management and monitoring; adequate administrative oversight and support; and to purchase necessary equipment for all this work.

Tuolumne County, as the holder of the MSA, will aim to add one additional staff to coordinate CEQA/NEPA project planning and oversight of consultants/specialists hired to do needed pre-project surveys.

The Tuolumne River Trust, as the fiscal agent for YSS and as a subcontractor for the County, will aim to hire two additional project management staff and six seasonal staff to assist with contract oversight and contractual compliance, monitor project implementation effectiveness, and to rigorously assess the sufficiency of mitigation measures. TRT will also add an additional administrative staff member to support project administration. Finally, TRT will purchase required field equipment, including field vehicles, safety equipment, radios, etc. to ensure adequate and safe project management.



### **3) Large-Landscape Planning and Project Readiness**

To ensure the planning pipeline is primed with shovel-ready projects, YSS will apply up to \$6,000,000 in grant funds to hire a consulting firm dedicated to planning the next large landscape area and helping to adjust NEPA where current approvals need review and adjustments. The new landscape project planning footprint would be expected to be at least 100,000 acres in size. YSS will also use a portion of the funds to update the Community Wildfire Protection Plan as the current plan for Tuolumne County is very out-of-date. The planning team will conduct the necessary field surveys and complete a NEPA document that the Forest Service can use for a final decision for Federal lands, and a CEQA-document that Tuolumne County can use on SRA lands.

### **4) Work-Force Training**

Tuolumne County and YSS seek \$2,000,000 in grant funding to be provided to the local Columbia Community College, Modesto Junior College, the Mother Lode Job Training Center, California Conservation Corps, Greater Valley Conservation Corps, Sierra Fellows, and Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Partnerships for the enhancement and expansion of forest restoration work force training. The funding would aim to significantly increase the capacity of work force training in the region and to broaden community involvement in resiliency projects and climate change mitigation.

Modesto Junior College, Columbia Community College, and Mother Lode Job Training are well positioned to significantly grow entry level training to enable participation in natural resource or technical skill courses that provide hands-on training in operating heavy equipment, doing pre-project plant, cultural, or wildlife surveys, growing expertise in planning and mitigation, and other ways to grow the needed work force to implement the planning, projects, monitoring, and communication outreach that are all needed for a significant ramp-up of the pace and scale of forest treatments.

### **5) Community Outreach and Education**

Tuolumne County and YSS will seek grant funding of \$250,000 to be re-awarded to local non-profits, FireSafe Councils, chamber of commerce interests, or other community interests who will provide matching funding toward strategically-selected efforts to educate regional residents about the value of resiliency treatments, personal preparation for drought or wildfire events, and community cooperation with the Forest Service, state agencies, the County, YSS, and others in the partnerships needed to better prepare for the expanding effects of climate change and to do all possible to reduce our contributions of GHG emissions, etc.