

Landscape Fire Resilience



The Watershed Research and Training Center Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Mid-Program Report

As California's wildfires increase in frequency, size, intensity and severity, there is an impulse to seek a silver bullet to solve our "fire problem." The concept of a centralized solution, however, is as antiquated as the central fire management system so interwoven with the problems we face today. The Regional Forest and Fire Capacity program offers a different approach: more akin to silver threads, that if strengthened through responsive, **nimble capacity investments**, and if woven together through **deliberate peer networking**, are positioned to move the needle from reactionary disaster management to landscapes more resilient to the next inevitable wildfire.

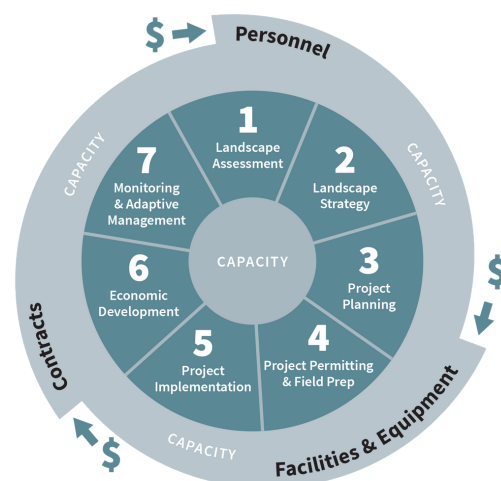
Below: Top barriers to increased forest and fire capacity in California, as perceived by practitioners.



WHO IS BEST POSITIONED TO ADVANCE THIS WORK, AND WHAT DO THEY NEED TO SUCCEED?

In our first phase of the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity program, the Watershed Research and Training Center identified 227 community-based entities (CBE's) advancing forest and fire restoration at the landscape scale. Our team, including lead researcher Dr. Emily Jane Davis (with Oregon State University and the Ecosystem Workforce Development Program) analyzed what capacities these practitioners perceived that they most needed to increase their efficacy in stewarding fire-resilient landscapes. We concluded that **capacity is cyclic, and consistent, flexible investments are critical to enabling these groups to help their communities live in more fire-resilient landscapes**. Check out the [Executive Summary](#) of this research for more information.

Below: The ability to advance fire-resilient landscapes often starts with investing in personnel who can then assess the landscape. Overtime, many CBEs move through a cycle such as the one below. Graphic inspired by a concept in the Lake Tahoe Basin Forest Action Plan (Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team, 2019).



'19/'20 Direct Investments



PROVIDING TECHNICAL EXPERTISE: FROM DRIPTORCH TO LEGAL

We are also deploying a team of technical experts to work with local groups across the state to build specific, critical capacities, largely based on what we learned in the aforementioned Capacity and Needs Assessment and a subsequent rapid COVID-19 capacities-at-risk survey.

For example, the Watershed Center is using RFFC funds to help launch and steward seven community-based burn cooperatives, also known as **Prescribed Burn Associations**, throughout the state. Recognizing the power of connecting peers with peers, our team has also created an online networking space, currently serving 65 prescribed fire leaders. Our in-house **biomass specialist** has also provided resources to practitioners through RFFC. In support of organization-level capacity building, we also contracted a law firm to provide **labor-law compliance**, critical to CBEs building their workforces.

FOSTERING LEADERSHIP IN UNREPRESENTED AREAS

Part of the brilliance of the RFFC program is that it leverages robust, trusted regionally-focused entities (e.g., state conservancies, etc.) and distributed non-competitive block grants for them to then invest as appropriate within their region. However, not all regions are serviced by state conservancies or have strong regional natural resource organizations. As a result, 18 counties lack RFFC coverage, some of which face profound forest and fire risks, granted not all do. WRTC is fostering relationships with CBEs in many of those counties and looking for sound investment and capacity-building opportunities among them. An **early investment of ~\$30,000 helped one unrepresented county, Lake County, secure \$3 million for landscape-level fire resilience work**. Enabling an organization to compensate technical experts to write grant applications, while also shoring up their internal systems and partnerships is such a simple, yet profound example of capacity investments paying tremendous dividends.

SUPPORTING INTERTRIBAL INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP

Recognizing the importance of creating new pathways for state investments to go directly to tribes, the Watershed Center **leveraged \$60,000 of RFFC funding to secure ~\$159,000 of private philanthropic support for an Intertribal Indigenous Stewardship Project**. The project is now being cultivated by two Indigenous project managers, and an Indigenous Design Committee.

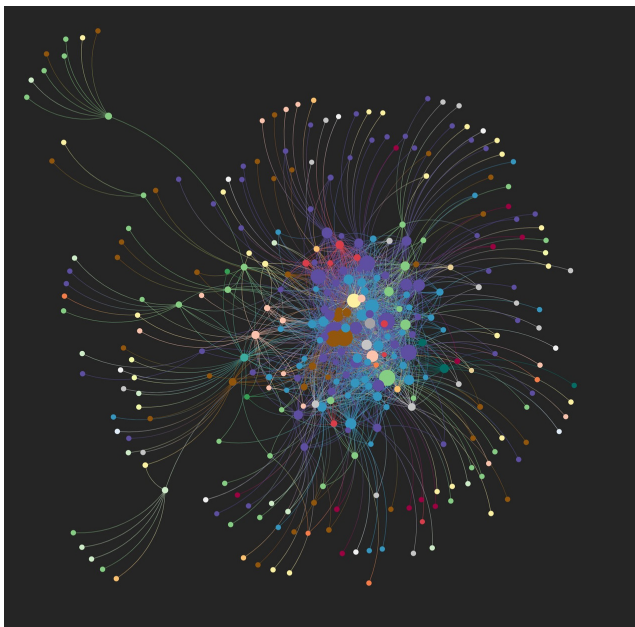
Scaffolding for Peer Networking RFFFC

Each CBE working on landscape resilience in their local place is also an asset to CBE's elsewhere. This is because each practitioner has the potential to pass on their best practices, innovations, and learning to people working on fire resilience elsewhere in the state. To make this potential influence a reality, **we need to nurture the connections among practitioners.**

In addition to offering in-house and contracted technical assistance and capacity-building to practitioners, the WRTC has built tools and connections that will facilitate peer networking. This network will be a powerful way to **ensure that isolation doesn't limit the ideas and projects practitioners aspire to.** This network will facilitate iterative learning and improvement as we face ongoing forest and fire management challenges.

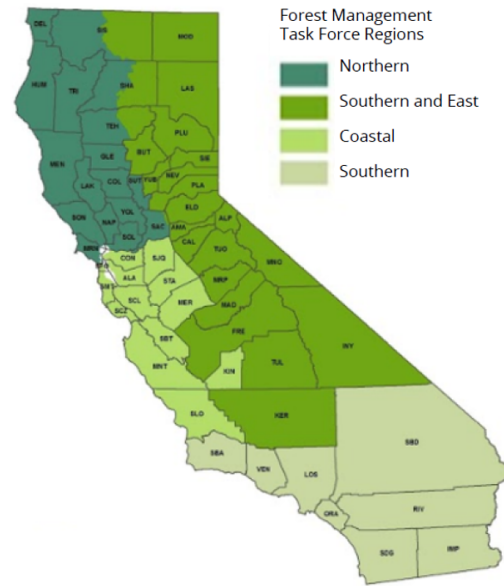
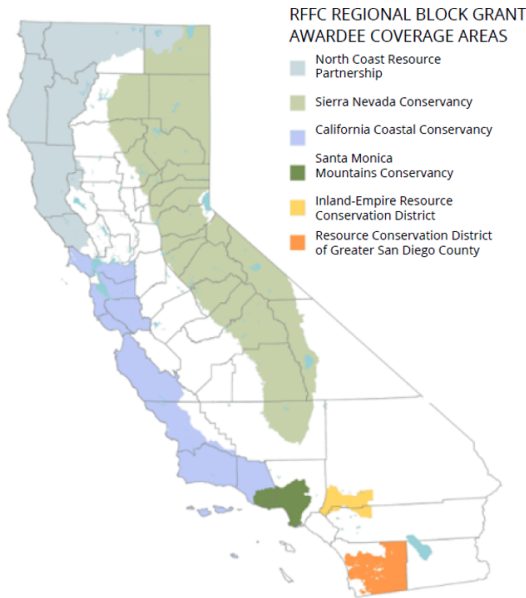
What exactly does this look like?

The Watershed Center has created an online, private, peer-networking workspace, where practitioners can pose and answer questions, share updates, and share resources. One hundred seventy five practitioners and agency partners currently participate, and even amidst the largest wildfire year on record, participation and engagement has already exceeded expectations. **Practitioners are eager to connect with one another, and this centralized yet democratized platform has the potential incubate powerful connections and relationships.**



Left: Although our 2019 Capacity and Needs Assessment revealed that there is a strong interest in learning from (and mentoring) peers, we needed to understand baseline connections to strategize peer networking pathways. This image is from our 2020 Social Network Analysis. Each dot represents a practitioner. The colors vary based on entity type, and the lines represent connections based on level of influence.

Regional Planning RFFFC



The RFFFC program has a significant emphasis on regional planning. By the end of this first iteration of the program, each regionally-focused grantee will have produced a Forest and Fire Regional Prioritization Plan. The RFFFC framework allows for regional interpretation of what should be in these strategic documents, and how they should be structured. In fact, some groups may not produce documents at all, and instead are developing linked databases, maps, and online tools that serve as "living" fire resilience strategies that can be adapted actively as biophysical, social, and funding conditions change. The Watershed Center recognized an important peer-learning opportunity among the RFFFC groups themselves regarding regional fire planning, especially given that there is another statewide fire prioritization process occurring concurrently through the Forest Management Task Force. We explored

how the sub grantees and others are advancing their planning efforts to allow for cross-pollination, and to reduce duplication. Our paper, [Review and Synthesis of Regional Priority Planning in California](#), has already led to meaningful adaptation. For example, through the paper, one RFFFC subgrantee, the Golden Gates Parks Conservancy learned of the North Coast Resource Partnership's process for financially compensating tribal advisors and has created a similar approach in their sub-region. **We are better together, and this network catalyzes that connection.**

Through RFFFC, the Watershed Center is serving in a pivotal capacity-building role, facilitating active exchange of the best ideas and practices in landscape fire resilience across the state's regions and communities. Together, we're building a more fire-resilient California.

This work is funded by a grant awarded by the California Natural Resources Agency as part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment — particularly in disadvantaged communities. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

