

## Caples Ecological Restoration Project

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**Project Area:** The project is located in the Caples Creek drainage, east of Silver Fork Road and west of Caples Lake, between Highway 50 and Highway 88 on the Placerville and Amador Ranger Districts in the Eldorado National Forest. The project is within an area that was recommended for wilderness designation in the 1989 Eldorado National Forest Land Management Plan. This watershed has been identified as a restoration priority.

**Project Summary:** A century of fire exclusion from Caples Creek drainage has led to higher fuel loading and tree density, which has increased the risk of high intensity wildfire. An important community water supply serving 110,000 people in the El Dorado Irrigation District is threatened, and the condition of meadows, streamside corridors, and aspen stands has declined. This project will complete 25 miles of prescribed fire containment line in preparation for 8,800 acres of burning. The project includes 4,400 acres of lower elevation understory burning, 4,400 acres of burning in vegetative islands mixed with rock at higher elevation, 25 acres of aspen restoration activities, and 25 acres of meadow restoration activities.

**Treatment:** Hand thinning, piling, pile burning, hand and aerial understory burning

**Total Acres:** 8,850    **Planning:** 2012-2016    **Implementation:** 2016-2031

**Responsible Agency/Organization:** U.S. Forest Service, Eldorado National Forest

**Partners:** The El Dorado Irrigation District received two grants from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy in support of this project. A grant for \$75,000 to complete project planning was awarded in 2012; and a grant for \$476,709 to implement restoration activities was awarded in 2016.

**Values to be Protected:** Biodiversity including mixed age mixed conifer stands, meadows, aspen and other hardwoods, American marten, Northern goshawk, and California spotted owl habitat; water quality, water supply and hydroelectric power generation; recreational fishing; wilderness character.

### Project Highlights:

**Fire History:** Fire has been almost entirely absent from the Caples Creek drainage since 1916. Natural lightning ignitions have occurred but were quickly suppressed. Prior to 1900, the average fire return intervals were 11 years in mixed conifer, 40 years in red fir, and 133 years in subalpine forests. The mixed conifer forest in the lower elevation of the Caples Creek drainage has been more altered by fire exclusion than the subalpine forest in the higher elevations.

**Watershed Improvement Program:** This project is aligned the goals of the Sierra Nevada Watershed Improvement Program to reduce wildfire risk and improve water quality and delivery. Caples Creek delivers a large amount of water to the South Fork American River which supplies domestic and agricultural water for a large portion of El Dorado County. Caples Creek is also part of the El Dorado Hydroelectric Project which is owned and operated by El Dorado Irrigation District under a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission License and includes multiple facilities and reservoirs located within the Eldorado National Forest.

**Fire MOU Partnership:** This project is aligned with the Fire MOU (Memorandum of Understanding), a joint effort by federal and state agencies, conservation organizations and community fire protection groups to promote the careful and

expanded use of fire for natural resource and other social benefits in California.

**Legacy Trees:** The project area includes old large trees greater than 30 inches in diameter which are protected as old growth habitat. The surface fuel that has accumulated at the base of these trees makes them more prone to damage by fire. Litter and duff will be raked away where burning could cause more than 5% mortality.

**Meadow Restoration:** Jake Schneider Meadow, Government Meadows, Convict Meadow and a portion of Schneider Camp Meadow are within the project area. Removal of conifers will improve hydrologic function and restore meadow habitat. A half mile of existing hiking trail that crosses through Jake Schneider Meadow will also be rerouted to the north side of the meadow along the tree line to reduce impacts from visitor use on sensitive meadow habitat.

**Aspen Restoration:** Aspen groves need full sunlight to establish and grow. Without fire, more conifers are getting established which are over-shading the aspens and limiting their ability to re-sprout.

**Project Map:**

