

The Roles and Contributions of the Sierra National Forest - DRAFT

The Sierra National Forest (Sierra NF), located on the western slope of the central Sierra Nevada is known for its spectacular mountain scenery and abundant natural resources. The forest encompasses more than 1.3 million acres that are between 900 and 13,986 feet in elevation. The lands and people surrounding this area have an important influence on the forest's management. Native Americans have inhabited these areas for thousands of years and their diversity, longevity, and importance in the region result in deep cultural ties to the forest and surrounding lands. The forest lies in the traditional territories of five federally recognized tribes, as well as a number of other tribes, groups, and tribal organizations. Tribal communities consult and partner in forest management activities.

The forest is bordered by Yosemite National Park and the Stanislaus National Forest to the north, the Inyo National Forest and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Park to the east, and the Sequoia National Forest to the south. In conjunction with these lands, the Sierra NF forms one of the most active recreation areas in the world and as a result, receives nearly 1.5 million visitors per year. The San Joaquin Valley and foothills located to the west is mostly rural and agricultural in character and has historic and current economic and cultural ties to the commodities that are produced on the forest (e.g. clean water for farming, cultural resources, a sustainable livestock forage and timber supply). In addition, the Valley is home to urban centers with a growing and increasingly diverse population that is seeking new and evolving recreational opportunities. Within this ecological, social and economic landscape, the Sierra NF contributes a vast array of benefits.

The cool air, sparkling water, and breathtaking scenery of the High Sierras function as a magnet attracting visitors from the congestion of population centers within an easy drive. The Sierra NF is within a four hour drive of nearly half of the 35 million people who make their homes in the State of California. This populous pool of potential visitors is one of the most ethnically diverse in the world, challenging the forest to look at nontraditional methods of providing service.

The lakes and wilderness areas of the Sierra NF are two of its most popular public attractions. For decades now, lakeshores have accommodated intensive recreation while sites in natural settings have provided visitors with a connection to expansive wild areas. Nearly a half million acres are some of the most popular wilderness areas in California, offering solitude and vast open space as part of one of the largest contiguous blocks of wilderness in the continental United States. Outfitter-guides help provide quality recreational experiences.

Key developed recreation areas on the forest include Bass Lake, which is lower in elevation and attracts the highest number of visitors, as well as higher alpine water bodies such as Huntington Lake. Popular paved driving and scenic corridors, two designated as National Scenic Byways, are the conduit for connecting people from low elevation, urban settings to cool, high elevation solitude. These corridors provide dramatic geology, historic and vegetative contrasts including an intimate experience with Giant Sequoias. The resulting tourism from recreational opportunities on the forest is also important in contributing to the economic sustainability of local communities. This contribution occurs through visitor spending that supports jobs in local businesses and also contributes to county sales tax revenues that local governments use to provide important public services in local communities.

During the winter months, most of the Sierra NF is covered in snow, but in the summer it experiences the same Mediterranean climate common to most of California. With three primary rivers, 469 lakes, 11 reservoirs countless streams, the Sierra NF is a popular destination for summer water sport enthusiasts. In the winter, snowboarding and skiing (both downhill and cross-country) remain popular, while snowmobile and ATV use is increasing.

Grazing has occurred on the rangelands of the Sierra NF since the late 1800s and livestock grazing continues to be one of a variety of multiple uses on the Sierra NF that contributes to the economic and social well-being of people by providing opportunities for economic diversity, promoting stability for communities that depend on range resources for their livelihood, and by meeting the public needs for interrelated resource uses by providing livestock forage, wildlife food and habitat, outdoor recreation and other resource values dependent on range vegetation.

Cultural activities and opportunities that restore and regenerate forest resources and sustain lives and livelihoods are also an important contribution of forest lands. Native Americans use the forest for gathering traditional materials in sedge beds, sour berry patches, meadows, elderberry patches, and black oak groves. Of particular interest to the Native American community is the preservation and access to spiritual sites.

Further, the changing elevation across the forest, combined with the variability in aspect and slope, the variety of geology and soils, and the amount and timing of precipitation creates an extremely high diversity of ecosystems. At the lowest elevations, rising above the valley floor is the foothill zone which extends up to the montane zone. Ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests dominate the montane zone. Next, the upper montane zone is comprised of a mosaic of red fir forests, open Jeffrey pine woodlands, meadows, and montane chaparral. At the highest elevations, the sparsely vegetated subalpine and alpine zone occurs. Massive areas of rock outcrops occur throughout all of these vegetation types. Herbaceous plant species contribute most to plant species richness. These varied ecosystems are inhabited by over 1,400 plant species, and approximately 350 fish and wildlife species. The forest's terrestrial and aquatic plant and animal species are dependent on resilient ecosystems that also sustain a social and economic fabric connected to a healthy forest. Wildland fire has been a vital part of the Sierra Nevada range for centuries. Many of the ecosystems that make up the Sierra NF have been shaped by the way fire moved across the landscape in the past as well as have been shaped by the lack of fire in recent history, and need fire to remain resilient.

While many enjoy the opportunities the Sierra NF provides, there are many that call the forest their home. Communities have grown adjacent to and within the Sierra NF over time. Maintaining these wildland urban interface areas in a condition that prevents the spread of fire into adjacent lands and communities is a key contribution of the forest to local communities. Fire along with mechanical treatments is used as a tool within the national forest to reduce hazardous fuels and achieve other desired conditions. However, fire is actively suppressed to protect key resources within the national forest and to prevent intrusion of dangerous fires into the wildland urban interface.

Over 2.5 million gallons per year of clean water from the forest flows into the San Joaquin River in the north, and into the Kings River in the south. These rivers fill eleven reservoirs that are on or are adjacent to the Sierra NF and that ultimately supply water and power to the populations, farms and industries of the San Joaquin Valley. This contribution of the forest is critical in supporting the economic and social sustainability of jobs, rural culture and quality of life in the San Joaquin Valley. There are also benefits to

people living outside of the Valley who value the commodities obtained from continued agricultural production in the area – one of the most diverse and fertile agricultural areas in the world.

Some of these benefits of the forest are more easily appreciated than are others. For example, forest recreational, economic and cultural opportunities, as well as a clean water supply, are enjoyed directly by people and communities as a whole and as a result, their contributions to our well-being are more clearly understood. Other vital forest ecosystem services provide benefits that are less apparent in our daily lives, but are important because they support and regulate the ecosystems and social environments in which we live (e.g. biodiversity). The benefits from all forest contributions provide tremendous ecological, social and economic value to us all. The term “value“ as used here, represents something more inclusive than a monetary value, and capture the idea that all contributions of the Sierra NF, even when they are not directly relatable to dollars that are spent or received, still contribute significantly to improving the quality of our lives.