

Upper American River Watershed Group (UARWG)

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

Tuesday, December 17, 2024; 11:00am – 2:00pm

El Dorado County Planning & Building Department, Lobby Conference Room

850 Fairlane Ct, Placerville, CA 95667

Meeting Summary

Meeting Purpose: Building on the ongoing landscape-scale project success stories and lessons learned from the Fall 2024 Countywide Plenary for Water (Plenary), the Upper American River Watershed Group (UARWG) reconvened for a project development workshop. In this workshop, group members discussed opportunities to coordinate and collaborate on landscape-scale projects, and identify at least one UARWG-supported project.

Desired Outcomes:

- Shared understanding of and consensus on the UARWG purpose and opportunities
- Joint landscape scale project(s) for watershed funding opportunities

The following is a summary of the meeting discussion, including comments and questions that were brought up by UARWG members and discussed as a group.

Welcome and Setting Intention

Rebecca Guo, General Manager, El Dorado Water Agency (EDWA) began the workshop with an overview of the meeting purpose. As a follow-up to the Fall 2024 Plenary, this workshop was a reconvening of the UARWG to strategically coordinate and identify opportunities for landscape-scale projects for potential 2025 funding. Orit Kalman, Facilitator, asked participants to introduce themselves and respond to two prompts: thoughts about the Fall 2024 Plenary (for those who attended), and coordination/collaboration opportunities in the UARWG.

UARWG Responses:

Participants discussed the Plenary and UARWG as forums for collaboration and partnership building. Specific input from the UARWG participants included the following:

- Additional funding is needed to complete the necessary USFS projects. The USFS team is also seeking to work on cross-jurisdictional efforts.
- El Dorado County's pesticide use regulation and noxious weed management programs overlap with the UARWG's watershed health objectives.
- Landscape scale projects are necessary to attract funding and policy attention for the region. An example of partnership efforts is PCWA's Master Stewardship Agreement with USFS.

Consensus on UARWG Organization

Orit Kalman summarized the Draft UARWG Charter v. 12.16.2024, which was provided to the group for review. The charter was updated from the original 2022 version now that the Programmatic Watershed Plan (PWP) has been completed, and it focuses on the ongoing efforts and functions of the UARWG. The updated charter also ensures that the UARWG meets the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) requirements for grant eligibility as a 'watershed group.' Through the consensus-seeking approach for group support outlined in the charter, group consensus is decided during meetings based on information sharing, discussions, and presentations.

UARWG Comments:

- The charter should include tracking UARWG's progress in alignment with the PWP objectives.
 - Response: Noted for incorporation into final draft.

Developing Landscape Scale Projects

Hannah Romero, Water Resources Principal, El Dorado Water Agency presented concepts related to the UARWG's shared interests in landscape scale projects for strategy refinement in funding acquisition.

Coordinated and Strategic Partnerships

Landscape scale projects require coordinated and strategic partnerships to successfully work across various jurisdictions and land ownership types. Information and data sharing is an important means of finding opportunities for project partnerships. The UARWG recently collaborated to provide project information to populate the Tahoe Central Sierra (TCS) Project Tracker, which provides the geographic location and other information for projects in the region.

Framework for Landscape Projects

In the context of the UARWG and PWP implementation, a landscape-scale project refers to an action that:

- Applies to interconnected, diverse, and cross-jurisdictional landscapes,
- Benefits multiple interests,
- Efficiently and effectively achieves project goals and objectives,
- Leverages the interconnectedness of natural, built, and social capital for sustainable and responsible investments, and
- Provides tangible contributions to watershed health and community resilience.

Landscape scale projects are to be developed in alignment with the Resource Management Strategies in the PWP.

Key Funding Opportunities

Key types of funding opportunities include state and federal grants, bond funding (e.g., \$10B in Proposition 4 funding to be distributed), and federal funding appropriations.

The existing funding opportunity under consideration for near-term action is the USBR WaterSMART Environmental Water Resources Projects (EWRP) grant program. This grant program supports on-the-ground implementation projects focused on benefits to ecological values or watershed health. These projects must have been developed as part of a collaborative process to help carry out an established strategy to increase the reliability of water resources, which the UARWG meets through the PWP. Forest tree thinning and post-fire restoration activities that protect water resources are eligible but not prescribed burning or vegetation management.

With watershed group support, up to \$5,000,000 in Federal funds may be awarded for projects to be completed within five years. Without watershed group support, the maximum award amount is \$3,000,000 for projects to be completed within three years. A 25% non-Federal cost share is also required regardless of watershed group support. Applications for the current funding round are due **March 11, 2025**.

UARWG Comments and Questions:

- What is required for a project to be considered “ecologically focused” under the EWRP grant program?
 - Response: The grant application must make a clear connection to beneficial ecological outcomes. There may also be specific requirements based on the project type. For example, funded water conservation projects require that the conserved water is made available for ecological benefits, such as a commitment to ensuring instream flows.
- Does land acquisition qualify under the EWRP grant program?
 - Response: No, land acquisition projects would require a different type of funding opportunity.
- The Sierra Nevada Conservancy funded the County’s invasive weed program, so this could potentially be part of the cost share.
- How can we determine if funding from an existing project would be eligible as a cost share?
 - The cost share must cover at least 25% of the total project costs through non-Federal contributions, so we would need to determine how the existing project is part of the proposed project and coordinate timelines. These are details to be worked out during project development.

Other Funding Opportunities

Hannah shared a list of general factors that may affect funding eligibility and/or chances of award and therefore should be considered when evaluating proposed projects. Participants were asked to share any other known funding opportunities with the group.

UARWG Input:

- Aspen regeneration projects may be eligible funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board. Also, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) Forest Health grant program is currently open for forest management and restoration projects.
- There are funding opportunities for land trusts through the California Council of Land Trusts. ARC recently received an award from this group for advancing land conservation in the upper American River and upper Cosumnes River watersheds.
- There is funding from the Invasive Species Council of California (ISCC) for weed abatement.

Examples of Landscape Scale Project Opportunities

In the preworkshop activity, input was received from USFS, El Dorado & Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts (RCD), County Office of Wildfire Preparedness and Resilience (OWPR), and El Dorado Irrigation District (EID). Contributors added projects to the map of the upper American River watershed in GIS. EDWA used that information to identify five general project areas to facilitate group discussion:

- Georgetown
- Placerville
- Pollock Pines
- Crystal Basin
- Caldor burn scar

USFS Eldorado National Forest Collaborative Projects

Michelle Wolfgang, Partnership Coordinator, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), presented the existing USFS projects and NEPA-approved areas in the Georgetown, Crystal Basin, and Caldor burn scar areas. In each of these areas, the available funding only covers a portion of the total cost to treat the NEPA-approved areas, so the majority of the treatment costs are still unfunded. In the Georgetown area, some of the NEPA-approved areas were not covered under the Collaborative Wildfire Risk Reduction Program (CWRRP) that was previously prepared, so there are additional NEPA-approved areas in need of funding.

RCD Collaborative Projects

Mark Egbert, District Manager, El Dorado & Georgetown Divide RCD presented the RCD's ongoing efforts in the general areas of Placerville and Pollock Pines. The City of Placerville Community Wildfire Resiliency Plan is expected to be finalized in January 2025 and include a project list for implementation. Many projects center around the City of Placerville near critical assets. The projects are expected to be CEQA-ready by February 2025.

The Fire Adapted 50 Phase III - Highway 50 Corridor Forest Health Improvement Project includes the area along Highway 50 between Placerville and Echo Summit, including Pollock Pines. The RCD is preparing to submit an application for this project through the CAL FIRE Forest Health Grants program by the deadline on January 15, 2025.

Group Discussion

Following the project presentations, the group provided feedback, shared additional projects, and discussed collaboration opportunities.

UARWG Input and Comments:

- During the Caldor Fire, CAL FIRE had trouble protecting EID's canals because they could not see them past the vegetation and tree canopy overgrowth. The El Dorado Canal Fuel Break Project will protect approximately 3 miles of canal just north of the Caldor burn scar area, and the project currently has funding in place. EID and CAL FIRE also have a Vegetation Management Program in place to conduct the Sly Park Recreation Area Hazard Fuels Reduction Project. Another project on EID's list is the Reservoir 1 and Pollock Pines Tank Replacement Project to replace two Hypalon-covered tanks with new concrete tanks. Concern regarding the susceptibility of Hypalon covers in a high-severity fire arose after the Camp Fire in Paradise.
- The Weber Creek Project near Placerville was awarded \$25M in funding from the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) for home hardening and clearing 100-ft defensible space boundaries for up to 525 homes. OWPR is open to collaboration and partnership to potentially expand the project to include fuel breaks and forest thinning.
- Invasive plants are an important consideration for post-fire restoration projects. The County is still working to control invasive spotted knapweed resulting from the Cleveland Fire of 1992.
- GDPUD has two diversions with projects to be repaired: Otter Creek and Onion Creek. It would be helpful to consider these diversions in project planning for the Georgetown area.
- There may be opportunities for collaboration with the County of Placer as they have been working on partnership projects such as the Foresthill Divide Community Protection Project. PCWA is also working on a project along the county border in the Eldorado National Forest. The Long Canyon Watershed Protection Project is a forest treatment project that includes 16,500 acres in partnership with USFS and Sierra Pacific Industries.
- No ARC projects would be eligible for funding under the USBR EWRP grant program. ARC's Wakamatsu Farm project is fully funded, but they are also working on private and U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land along Highway 49. They need funding to install boundary fencing to implement livestock grazing for fuels reduction. There also needs to be a separate collaboration discussion regarding conservation easements.
- The UARWG participants agreed that the Georgetown and Placerville areas should be considered for applying to the USBR WaterSMART grant. Follow-up discussions with the project leads are needed to determine which or both projects to be submitted.

Action Items and Next Steps

The next UARWG meeting is tentatively planned for April 2025, following the EWRP grant application submittal in March 2025.

- EDWA to convene potential project partners to define project scope and identify cost share funding. To facilitate the discussion, EDWA will develop additional mapping materials. EDWA will inform the UARWG of the project summary prior to EWPR grant application submittal.
- EDWA to incorporate feedback on the Draft Charter and send an updated version to the group to be finalized.
- EDWA to follow up with the UARWG to identify additional funding opportunities and track cost-share options.
- GDPUD to share location information for planned diversion projects (Otter Creek and Onion Creek).
- PCWA to share additional information on relevant partnership projects in Placer County, such as the Foresthill Divide Community Protection Project.
- ARC to share tribal contacts with EDWA. Though they may not have the capacity to participate, they should be included in communication regarding the UARWG’s activities.
- ARC and County Agricultural Commissioner to meet and discuss opportunities for agricultural land conservation.

Participation

Organization	Name
UARWG Members	
American River Conservancy	Elena DeLacy, Executive Director
City of Placerville	Melissa McConnell, City Engineer
County of El Dorado	LeeAnne Mila, Agricultural Commissioner/Sealer of Weights and Measures Tom Meyer, Program Manager, Office of Wildfire Preparedness and Resilience
El Dorado and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts	Mark Egbert, District Manager
El Dorado Irrigation District	Jon Money, Director of Engineering
El Dorado Water Agency	Hannah Romero, Water Resources Principal Kyle Ericson, Water Resources Principal Rebecca Guo, General Manager
Georgetown Divide Public Utility District	Alexis Elliott, Water Resources Manager Nicholas Schneider, General Manager
Placer County Water Agency	Darin Reintjes, Director of Resource Management

Organization	Name
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service	Michelle Wolfgang, Partnership Coordinator, Eldorado National Forest Andrew Mishler, District Ranger, Placerville Ranger District
Consultants	
Orit Kalman	Orit Kalman, Facilitator
Sunzi Consulting	Yung-Hsin Sun, Senior Principal Consultant

Additional Invited but Not Present at Meeting

Organization	Name
UARWG Members	
California Department of Water Resources	Lew Moeller, Program Manager
City of Placerville	Cleve Morris, City Manager
County of El Dorado	Jeffrey Warren, Director, Environmental Management Department Karen Garner, Director, Planning and Building Department Ken Pimlott, Principal Management Analyst, Office of Wildfire Preparedness and Resilience Rob Peters, Deputy Director, Planning and Building Department Sue Hennike, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer
County of Placer	Christina Hanson, Senior Planner Dave Atkinson, Assistant Director, Office of Emergency Services Jared Deck, Program Manager Kevin Bell, Assistant Director, Department of Public Works
El Dorado County Farm Bureau	Barb Kildow, Managing Director

Organization	Name
El Dorado Irrigation District	Brian Deason, Environmental Resources Supervisor
Georgetown Divide Public Utility District	Adam Brown, Operations Manager
Placer County Resource Conservation District	Andrew Justus-Fritz, Community and Conservation Director
Placer County Water Agency	Laura Rodarte, Associate Engineer
Regional Water Authority	Michelle Banonis, Manager of Strategic Affairs
Sacramento Municipal Utility District	Darold Perry, Supervisor, Hydroelectric License Implementation
Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians	Dustin Murray, Tribal Administrator James Sarmento, Executive Director of the Cultural Resources Division Kara Perry, Director of Site Protection Krystal Moreno, Manager of Traditional Ecological Knowledge
Sierra Nevada Conservancy	Chris Dallas, Central Sierra Area Representative
U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service	Jennifer House, Acting Forest Supervisor
U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation	Leeyan Mao, Deputy Area Manager, CCAO Mark Curney, Chief of Project Integration, CCAO