**TITLE**

Inyo-Mono Resource Conservation District

Facilitated Discussion 1 of 2 with RCD Board and Key Partners

**CONTACT**

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**OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND**

The office of the UC Cooperative Extension provides technical assistance to community, government, and private entities seeking to realize economic, community, and environmental benefits in regions throughout California. Board members of the Inyo-Mono Resource Conservation District sought technical support to gain additional strategic direction from California’s state-level Resource Conservation District. The board members sought to extend technical assistance with a hands-on planning session. They requested assistance from the local office of the UC Cooperative Extension.

Kristen Pfeiler from Inyo County’s Wildfire Mitigation program, a close partner of the RCD, partnered with Aaron Wilcher from UC Cooperative Extension and the state RCD consultant Amy Stork, with feedback and input from the RCD Board, to design two strategic planning sessions. The first facilitation activity provided history and context, oriented the Board to the process, and gathered ideas and feedback. The facilitated activity sets up a second facilitation that will review the feedback and prioritize projects based on the level of effort and potential timeline to initiate. Aaron Wilcher presented the results of 1-on-1 interviews with the Board and closely affiliated stakeholders to introduce the facilitation. Kristen Pfeiler presented the results of informal case studies of the Yuba RCD and Butte RCD, and potential areas for partnership between the Inyo and Mono counties’ wildfire coordinators. Aaron and Kristen facilitated an activity for breakout groups to discuss regional service gaps, key partnerships, and potential projects and priorities for the RCD.

**Brief notes from the main front-end business of the meeting**

* The Board swore in Katie Doonan as a new Board member
* There was a discussion about grant applications for water tanks in areas of the county that lack fire suppression infrastructure
* Discussion of hiring a part-time staff member to conduct administrative duties via a grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

**SUMMARY OF AARON’S SETUP PRESENTATION – Results of 1-on-1 interviews with the board and key partners**

Aaron presented the results of 1-on-1 interviews with the Board and key partners who have been attending the meetings.

* Ag and ranching producers are a big part of the history of the RCD- the volunteer-run RCD, and the end-user, customer community. There’s an interest in continuing to provide service to and partner with ag producers and ranchers.
* There have been historic partnerships between the RCD and the tribes.
* Forest management is a newer focus area, but seems to be a core potential area of focus.
* The Board and partners are most interested in seeing the RCD move forward and see its value in the community—at times the catalyzing project or issue seems to be subordinate to the important role of the institution (agency).
* In addition to having a core, anchor issue/project area, interviewees mentioned having an anchor client – an agency- DWP, USFS, BLM
* Board members seek specified roles and responsibilities, and projects and actions they need to be doing.
* The catalyst for RCD momentum is still to be discovered- staff capacity? Funding and contracts? The Board itself?
* The Board seeks education and training opportunities for RCD practices, partnerships, projects, and funding – this could take the form of webinars, guest speakers in the Board meetings, site visits, etc.

**SUMMARY OF KRISTEN’S PRESENTATION – RCD case studies and potential role for RCD to support wildfire coordinators**

Kristen presented on the results of 2 mini-case studies with RCDs in California- Butte and Yuba.

* Both started with small, focused projects- Yuba with CalRecycle educational videos; Butte with a trails plan that enabled adding a staff person to perform the work. These were catalytic projects that resulted in others.
* These organizations underscored the value of having anchor clients like land management agencies, county, water agency that are often understaffed and have needs for local services.
  + These anchor clients are often partners for grants- CA Dept. of Conservation, California RCD block grants, regional forest and fire capacity grants.
  + NRCS and the Forest Service are frequent partners for grants and contracts
* The orgs have explored different funding sources – membership dues, fees for service arrangements
* Kristen had specific suggestions for the ways RCD can support the Inyo and Mono wildfire coordinators
  + RCD hosting a regional Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance – a coordinating, convening group for Fire Safe Council, water associations, community, service districts, and to go after projects together and coordinate- hard for these orgs to do these individually with little capacity
  + Acting as a fiscal and administrative support to the county wildfire coordinators
    - E.g. an equipment lending organization
    - Acting as a lead agency for CEQA approvals
    - Sponsoring fuels reduction projects – vegetation management on bhalf of community and agency partners (CalFire, LADWP)
    - Often local agencies (county, town) don’t want to take on small projects, don’t want the risk management

**SUMMARY OF FACILITATED BREAKOUTS ON THE ROLE AND PRIORITIES OF THE RCD**

*Overview and key prompting question*

The intention of the facilitation was to conduct an inventory, to take stock of existing issues, interests, and priority project potential.

* Aaron explained the facilitation was part of a two-part planned meeting. The second session would be to establish priorities and to discuss which projects made sense for the short-term and long-term.

Aaron asked the group at the top of the agenda item to reflect on a central prompting question: *What is the greatest opportunity area for the RCD in the near term and why?*

* Gaps in service for the region?
* Partnerships and funding opportunities?
* Key roles for the RCD to play in addressing key community/ environmental issues

*General themes from the discussion*

There are some kind of general agreements of what the orientation and function of the RCD can do and why and how:

* The RCD past and future offers services that protect and promote conservation and stewardship of natural resources and working landscapes on behalf of public and private organizations and the community as a whole.
* The RCD holds the potential to be nimble and to create public-private partnerships that could fill critical gaps in service where local, state, and federal entities either don’t have the capacity or are faced with barriers that inhibit progress--regulatory, org function, legal requirements, etc. The RCD holds the potential to overcome these issues and to fulfill critical needs in the region.
* The RCD holds the potential to be nimble to be able to manage grants of different sizes, to leverage vital community resources such as volunteer groups, and to house staff that act on behalf of public and private partners.

*Projects, issues, and capacity raised for consideration in prioritization facilitation #2*

* There was support for the need to add staff capacity to catalyze projects, this was again seconded, thirded XOXOXOXO- reinforcing that
  + How do you get to sustainability from being all-volunteer
  + This relates to Organizational fundamentals
    - Need for capacity to provide structure and facilitation for meetings
* At least two groups discussed the need to solidify and update organizational fundamentals for risk, HR, procedural and legal requirements
  + Expressed some caution about risk management and needing to have the organization grounded in that regard
    - Workman’s comp and HR
    - Legal
    - Reporting to the state etc.
* The were several suggestions that the RCD provides a valuable public-private role and function that is not fulfilled in the community
  + There was some suggestion that the RCD has had limited agency and other org partnerships in the past
  + Projects that are otherwise not being done by staple public agencies
  + Opportunity to partner with land management agencies and utilities that also have gaps in service
  + RCD can be more nimble than public agencies where there are gaps in service and capacity
  + Opportunity to convene stakeholders and work on behalf of volunteer organizations to leverage resources- cooperative agreements are of interest
* There was also support for the idea of having a core, anchor partners – again this was seconded- “Find this anchor customer (e.g “the Forest Service is really understaffed”)
  + There was a suggestion of having the RCD act as a clearing house for partnerships
    - Multiple groups listed key partners
      * Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance
      * Weed Management Council
      * Inyo County
      * US Forest Service
      * Inyo Water Department
      * Owens Valley Indian Water Commission
      * Alterra
      * LADWP
  + This was seconded XOXO- the idea of stewardship agreements
  + AARON NOTE- Low hanging fruit would be to conduct a sort of partnership assessment for gaps in service …. IF – THEN , barriers and gaps in service – new- nimble capacity
  + Potential for adoption of innovative finance models and partnerships for infrastructure
    - Developing innovative partnerships using cooperative service and stewardship agreements between agencies and organizations
    - Community Wildfire Defense Grants
  + Explore opportunities for cost-share agreements with partner agencies and organizations
* There were at least two XOXO for just getting something going, wildfire mitigation, ag related to give the organization capacity – the idea that one project would ultimately catalyze others
  + Many comments on the notion that momentum resulted in more opportunities once the capacity is built because of proof of concept and momentum
  + Board members expressed strong interest, fundamental to the near-term future of the org, to “get something going” and to “have something to do”
  + AARON comment- strikes me that many of these issues are by definition interdisciplinary- weed management is related to fuels reduction is related to air quality is related to habitat and so on . . . . .
* Having wildfire mitigation and forest management be the core focus area for the RCD
  + Housing or closely partnering with the county wildfire mitigation program coordinators
  + Providing capacity support for forest management activities in the region
  + Providing strategy, operations, and implementation for pojects
  + Support smaller volunteer run organizations
  + Partnerships with Whitebark to be a kind of adjunct doing community wildfire and forest management projects
    - Fuels reduction
    - Eastern Sierra Forest Alliance
* Project idea of installing water tanks for wildfire mitigation / fire suppression in areas where there are no hydrants
  + This idea was seconded XOXOX- DWP and water agency partnerships for placing water tanks and using easements
  + This project was seconded XOXOXO- lots of communities around the region that don’t have water for fire suppression
* Marketing and education to stakeholders, partners, and the community about conservation issues
  + May be able to centrally house communication and education resources
  + Adding community education capacity for public and private workshops, education programs
  + Irrigation and rangeland management practices
    - Amplifying technical support resources from federal agencies
    - Scaling conservation projects by implementing technical assistance best practices (e.g. irrigation, water management, rangeland management)
* Jen Roeser brought up the Eastern Sierra weed management group as an example of a project the RCD could take up- the issue of invasive weeds, and the alignment with wildfire management- the Inyo County Ag Commissioner
  + support for agriculture – XOXO There was a second for this
  + Seconded the weed management and invasive species focus
* Soil sampling and testing
  + Soil cover management
  + partnerships opportunity for RCD with NRCS
* A couple-few ideas related to the notion of multi-faceted, ecological landscape projects
  + Kay is president of the Fire Safe Council, XXX is the President of the Water District – Idea of the 40 Acres Homeowner’s Association
    - “We’ve got the ideas, we’ve got the support, we’ve got the energy, and we’ve got the momentum in our community, but we have no money, we have no infrastructure, we have no operations, we have no employees [or capacity to manage grants].”
    - The group expresses that there is a need to have a leadership organization to corral the community and partners to lead- to identify the components of the initiative and shape them into projects, to navigate the issues and compliance with agencies
  + Similar to this is a landscape-type focus- where you have a couple core needs, and these relate to a broader ecosystem of needs
    - The Fish Slough Ecological preserve
    - County-owned property Big Pine conservation
      * Ability to lease the land for small-scale agriculture
* Another group discussed the idea of having RCD being involved in development projects (real estate) in the region where there is available real estate
  + Agriculture development – not much appetite in the county
  + Rob Pierce had done rangeland studies (NRCS Mikhala’s predecessor)
* There was an idea brought up to have the RCD act as an agent for riparian area conservation work
  + Volunteer organizations- CalFire didn’t want to host the project due to regulatory burden (CEQA)
  + Volunteers get you pretty far, but needs for management and administrative – regulatory, funding, coordination
    - Encouragement that even a small amount of money and staffing can leverage volunteer time