

## Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary

# North State Region – Sierra Buttes Trail Stewardship

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## Assets

Think about the natural assets — public lands, parks, trails, or other features — and the community assets — community facilities, airports, train stations, unique areas, and/or cultural events — that draw visitors to the region, and how the project connects to them. Then consider what kinds of investments, whether in staff capacity, coordination, or regional information sharing, the project would most benefit from to move forward.

### Consider:

- *What natural assets attract people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What community assets attract and bring people to the region, and how does the project connect to them?*
- *What investments would most help the project advance?*

### Discussion Points

#### *Opportunities:*

- Natural Assets
  - **Federal public land**
    - U.S. Forest Service
      - Plumas, Tahoe, Lassen, and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests
  - **State public land**
    - Plumas Eureka State Park features the oldest ski resort in North America with a recently restored pommel lift
  - The **Feather River watershed** is the largest in the Sierra, providing approximately **65% of California's clean drinking water**
  - **Diverse landscapes** support fishing, hunting, backcountry skiing, and recreation ranging from desert to alpine peaks within a single day's journey
  - 10,000 miles of maintained dirt roads, 21 fire lookouts, the Pacific Crest Trail, and **world-class trail systems** in Downieville, Quincy, and Susanville
- Community Assets and Regional Access
  - **SBTS connects communities to public lands** through trail development and events, enabling residents to access federal lands without getting in a car
  - **Trails function as a force multiplier**, connecting towns to main streets, creating new business models, and generating reasons to visit previously overlooked communities

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- Recreation in rural areas is **essential to culture and economy** — not merely a quality-of-life enhancement as in coastal areas
- The project creates **community-driven visions** for linking towns with trails and drives tourism into town centers while expanding local access to public lands

*Challenges:*

- Recreation resources are not broadly recognized as **economic drivers** or as psychologically important to **rural community health**

## 2 Policy & Regulations

Reflect on the policies or regulations the project has encountered, and whether they have opened doors or created roadblocks. Consider also where the policy landscape simply does not match conditions on the ground, and whether a governance structure — like a joint powers authority or special district — could help bridge that gap.

**Consider:**

- *Which policies or regulations have helped or hindered the project?*
- *Where does the policy landscape not match reality on the ground, and what structures might help?*

### Discussion Points

*Opportunities:*

- **Good Neighbor Authority** is being explored as a potential mechanism for navigating cross-jurisdictional project work
- **Relationships with agency staff** are more valuable than any specific policy in getting projects done
- In the past, completing **NEPA on federal land satisfied CEQA requirements** for state-funded projects — restoring this practice would reduce duplicative burden
- Policy mechanisms to **preserve housing stock** for local residents would support workforce stability and community health

*Challenges:*

- **NEPA and CEQA** processes are not project stoppers, but both require funding that is difficult to secure
- A policy change in the last five years now **requires CEQA even when NEPA has already been completed** for state money spent on federal land, adding cost and delay

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- A recent CNRA meeting included **no discussion of working with the federal government or Forest Service**, raising questions about how rural California, where state parks are often absent, fits into state planning
- **No consistent policy framework** exists to guide cross-jurisdictional recreation and land management work

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**Funding**

Consider what funding opportunities have identified and pursued, and what challenges have arisen if none are available. Think about how well current funding aligns with the actual needs and timeline — including reimbursement structures, long-term maintenance, and the ability to braid multiple sources together — and whether a capacity gap exists between the project and the funding it requires.

**Consider:**

- *What funding opportunities have been found, and what gaps or challenges remain?*
- *How well does available funding match the project's real needs, and can multiple funding sources be leveraged?*

**Discussion Points**

*Opportunities:*

- The project is funded through Sierra Nevada Conservancy in partnership with USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region 5, with a **broad coalition** of national forest, county, and city partners
- **Diverse funding sources** include private foundations, individual donors, industry partners, a Vision Circle program (three-year commitments of \$2,500/year minimum), and Friends of the Stewardship recurring donations
- California's **OHV program offers a proven model**; a similar centralized funding mechanism for non-motorized trail users could transform the funding landscape
- An **excise tax on outdoor recreation equipment** has been proposed as a potential trail maintenance funding source
- **Visitor-focused sales taxes** have succeeded elsewhere (Mammoth achieved 72% and 67% approval) and could work in rural communities with clear, accessible communication
- A **regional block grant concept** (one grant to a county-level entity coordinating across recreation, forestry, and fisheries) has been proposed to CNRA leadership
- **GoBiz and Jobs First's** focus on economics and job creation provides new leverage for recreation advocacy

*Challenges:*

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- The primary need is **unrestricted funds** to enable competitive grant matching and eliminate lengthy reimbursement processes
- **Federal funding** (GAOA, secure rural schools, RTP) lacks consistency in timing and availability
- Described funding search as "turning couch cushions" and "hosting bake sales" due to lack of consistent sources
- Non-motorized trail funding is very limited outside of **Prop 68 and RTP** (federal program through state)
- The funding search has been described as "**turning couch cushions**"; the organization continuously braids multiple sources and relies on 500–1,000 volunteers per season as match
- Grant programs need **broader scope**, wider arrays of fundable activities, and **easier advance payments** with less bureaucratic burden
- **Sector silos** prevent funders from recognizing and supporting multi-benefit projects

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**Data**

Think about what data resources exist in the region to support your project — things like visitation numbers, economic impact, or user behavior — and what is missing that should be measured. Consider who owns the data, what happens to it when the project ends, and whether data to demonstrate the project's value to the agencies and funders who need to act on it can be used.

**Consider:**

- *What data is available and what important data is still missing?*
- *Who owns the data, and can it be used to make the case to funders and decision-makers?*

**Discussion Points**

*Opportunities:*

- **SBTS conducts surveys** at each event using consistent questions, building a proprietary dataset over time
- The organization **collects its own data** for grant applications and to support local business conversations about mountain biker spending patterns
- **Outdoor industry economic forecasts** from comparable recreation destination towns provide useful benchmarks
- In small towns, board members, city officials, and business owners **directly observe** visitor origins and economic impact. Data confirms what local leaders already know
- **SBTS develops its own data** rather than depending on external sources, giving it control over what gets measured and how it's used

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*Challenges:*

- **Limited data available** through chambers of commerce, DMOs, or counties

**5 Climate Change**

Reflect on whether climate change is a factor in the project — through shifting seasons, temperature fluctuations, or changing visitor behaviors — and how the project is responding or adapting. Consider whether the project is connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding, and what it would take to do so.

**Consider:**

- *How is climate change affecting the project, and how are the project sponsors responding?*
- *Is the project connected to climate resilience or mitigation funding opportunities?*

**Discussion Points**

*Opportunities:*

- **Trails can serve as tools** to help the Forest Service get ahead of fire risk, creating natural partnerships between recreation infrastructure and forest management
- Reduced snowpack has extended recreation seasons into March and January, bringing additional visitors during previously off-season months
- The region's **outdoor adventure economy** (backcountry skiing, individual expeditions) is more resilient to snowpack variability than a resort-dependent model
- Strong potential connections exist between **Proposition 4 funding** and forest management; grant makers need to be more open-minded about multi-benefit projects that span recreation, forestry, and watershed health
- **Trails can serve a dual purpose** for recreation and fire mitigation, offering a compelling case for climate-connected investment

*Challenges:*

- **A longer and more intense fire season** affects the ability to work, visitor enjoyment, and employee job stability
- The region **depends on snowpack** at 5,000 feet for healthy watershed and creek flows; reduced snow accumulation raises serious concerns about water availability
- More rain instead of snow means trail crews worked year-round this year, which **signals both opportunity and ecological concern**
- The region lacks the ski resort infrastructure to **capture high-elevation snowpack**, making it more exposed to climate-driven precipitation shifts

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**Workforce**

Think about the workforce gaps standing in the way of the project moving forward, and whether the project's proponents are finding the skills, contractors, and project managers they need locally. Consider also whether the project creates opportunities to build longer-term workforce pipelines through partnerships with community colleges, workforce boards, or local hire programs.

**Consider:**

- *What workforce gaps are slowing the project, and is the project finding the talent needed locally?*
- *Does the project create opportunities to build long-term workforce pipelines in the region?*

**Discussion Points**

*Opportunities:*

- Recent job postings for trail builders and guides received an **overwhelming response**, demonstrating strong interest
- **Targeted recruitment has worked**: a guide relocated from Alaska after researching Quincy; three others came from outside the area after attending events or reading about the region
- SBTS pays "house-buying wages" with benefit packages so **employees can participate in the local economy**, not just work in it
- **Second homeowners are being recruited as board members and major donors**, converting a community tension into a potential resource

*Challenges:*

- **Housing is the primary workforce constraint**: not expensive as ski resort communities, but critically limited in quantity
- The Greenville fire destroyed approximately 10% of the county's **housing stock**
- **Second home purchases** further lock up available housing, and the surrounding **national forest limits the ability to expand communities outward**
- A chicken-and-egg dynamic persists: **building community** requires people, but attracting people requires community
- **Dedicated Forest Service staff** on local districts, essential for project oversight, has become increasingly difficult to secure
- Too many **second homeowners** relative to full-time residents can destabilize community cohesion even as they bring economic resources

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**Collaboratives**

Reflect on the collaborative relationships your project depends on — across jurisdictions, land managers, or tribal partners — and where those relationships are accelerating progress or slowing things down. Consider whether there is a regional body or coordination structure your project needs but does not yet have access to.

**Consider:**

- *What collaborative relationships does your project depend on, and where are they helping or hindering?*
- *Is there a regional body or coordination structure you need but don't yet have?*

**Discussion Points**

*Opportunities:*

- SBTS operates under **master challenge cost-share agreements** with the Forest Service, providing a durable structural foundation for collaboration
- Long-lasting personal relationships with **trusted Forest Service staff** are currently the most effective tool for navigating policy barriers creatively
- The organization excels at **convening stakeholders** across cities, counties, and state and federal agencies, including challenging partners
- An emerging opportunity exists for **collaboration between recreation and forestry groups** that have not previously seen themselves as partners, a potential renaissance of ecological partnership modeled on historical Patagonia-era advocacy
- **Recreation crosses political boundaries** and is difficult to politicize, making it a strong platform for broad coalition building
- State-to-federal coordination around recreation and **recognition of recreation's role in rural economic development** is an area ripe for investment
- SBTS has strong administrative and grant-writing capacity; what's needed is **higher-level state-to-federal coordination**

*Challenges:*

- **Dismantling of Forest Service agency** (not individual staff) is the primary collaborative challenge; supervisor positions do not pay enough to attract and retain talent
- The state needs to maintain confidence that the federal government and Forest Service can follow through on **commitments to partners**
- Healthy, **well-staffed partner agencies** are essential; resources are narrowing in the short term, requiring increasingly strategic thinking about how to use partnerships
- **Higher-level state-to-federal coordination capacity** is needed but does not currently exist

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## **Branding & Marketing**

Think about whether your project or region has a clear identity, and how effectively you are telling your story to your community, to funders, and to decision-makers at the state and federal level. Consider whether your project's brand or identity could go beyond marketing to become a tool for financing, advocacy, or building political will.

### **Consider:**

- *Does your project or region have a clear identity, and how well are you telling that story?*
- *Could your project's brand become a financing or advocacy tool, not just a marketing one?*

### **Discussion Points**

#### *Opportunities:*

- Adopted the **"Lost Sierra" name** 20 years ago transforming an unknown corner of California into a recognized outdoor recreation destination over 15-20 years
- The organization has a **global membership of over 40,000 people** who signed up independently, and **strong media relationships** that consistently generate quality storytelling and visitor interest
- A San Francisco Chronicle outdoor writer is coming to cover the Connected Communities project, representing a significant **earned media** opportunity
- SBTS functions as the **de facto visitor bureau and chamber of commerce** for the region, with its brand serving as a financing and advocacy tool, not just a marketing vehicle
- **Engagement with Visit California** is growing, including a meeting last week
- The project brand has demonstrated that **reputation-building through consistent quality work** and storytelling over two decades can drive both visitation and investment

#### *Challenges:*

- Local chambers of commerce lack digital capacity with **no significant regional marketing** infrastructure outside of SBTS
- The region **falls between two Visit California areas** (Shasta Cascade and Gold Country), making it hard to surface as a destination the way clearly defined regions like the Eastern Sierra do
- Building a **destination reputation takes time**; Downieville did not become an international destination overnight, and patience and sustained investment are required