

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Sector — Project Interview Summary

Sierra Region – Towns to Trails

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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
 - Stanislaus, Inyo, Sierra, Sequoia national forests
 - Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit
 - Yosemite National Park
 - Natural assets fall into two complementary categories: **intrinsic value** (ecosystem services, wild environments) and **utilitarian value** (recreation opportunities) -- the trail project draws on both
 - Recreation users seek **long, uninterrupted outdoor experiences** away from urban infrastructure
 - The **landscape itself is the equity**, with economic activity reverse-engineered from existing assets
- Community Assets and Regional Access
 - Rural Sierra communities represent a rare and largely undiscovered preservation of **folk art, Americana, and distinct local cultures**

Challenges:

- Historic maps of the Sierra Nevada and agreement documents stored at the USFS Region 5 facility in Vallejo are critical to Towns to Trails projects and are **at risk of disposal** following federal office closures; their loss would be irreplaceable

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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:

- The **Explore Act and BOLT Act** are helpful federal policies advancing recreation access on public lands
- **Proposition 4 and the California Trails Act** are elevating public consciousness around outdoor recreation and access
- **Outdoors For All** has successfully united conservation, recreation, equity, access, and diversity groups around a shared agenda
- **NEPA**, while complex, serves a useful function in encouraging thoughtful public land use
- Recent federal and state initiatives are moving in a **positive direction overall**

Challenges:

- Immediate advocacy support is needed in response to a **logging executive order** with significant implications for public lands recreation
- **California Wildlife Areas prohibit bikes** without clear logical justification -- a policy artifact of bikes being invented after 1990 rather than any evidence-based rationale
- Fortress conservation models have been criticized by Indigenous tribes and communities of color as a form of **Colonization 2.0**, reflecting a failure to center equity in land management policy
- Federal and state policies frequently **fail to reflect local** topography and community context; hard-line regulations need to be replaced with **frameworks that allow local adjustment**
- Policy should prioritize **equity over equality** to account for historic injustices in who has had access to public lands

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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:

- **Upfront government investment** shortens the timeline to private foundation funding, helping break the chicken-and-egg dynamic where each funder waits for the other to commit first
- **Proposition 4** climate funding is available and potentially applicable to the project, though bureaucratic distribution is slow

Challenges:

- **Sustained operational funding** is the core unmet need: covering community management, trail maintenance, signage, interpretive materials (including bilingual print and digital), post-disaster repairs, and staff capacity for economic development support along the route
- Typical grants range from \$5,000 to \$15,000 with **extensive deliverables**, and rarely cover project administration costs
- **Federal funding is difficult to access** without achieving BOLT Act designation or historic trail status
- **Management funding** needs are in the five-to-six-figure annual range, far exceeding what small foundation grants can reliably provide
- The funding landscape shifts year to year based on outdoor industry performance and political administration, making **long-range planning** difficult
- Climate funding distribution is bureaucratically slow and **tends to favor urban projects** with larger voter bases over rural communities with greater equity needs
- Specific funding asks to state leadership for **collaborative support** have not yet been made but are needed
- Need funding to **digitize old Forest Service maps** and agreement documents

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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:

- California leads the nation in **outdoor recreation economic output** at \$87.87 billion (12.6% of the national total) providing a powerful macro-level advocacy figure (though the number includes Disneyland and RVs, so rural-specific figures require a significant asterisk)
- **Reasonable visitation data** exists for national forests and parks, and good data is available on rural communities outside park and forest boundaries

Challenges:

- **User behavior data** is severely lacking; surveys are rare due to funding constraints and the Forest Service's National Visitor Use Monitoring process only runs every five years
- **Collecting data on federal land** requires permits and permissions from local rangers, and approval depends on personal relationships built over five to ten years -- land managers control access to data collection, not just data ownership
- **Paper records are vulnerable to loss** during office cleanings and closures, and historic Forest Service maps face disposal risk
- **Indigenous tribes lack the administrative capacity funding** needed to share ethnographic, cultural, and geographic data that would significantly enrich the project
- National Forest economic impact data is outdated; the Forest Service stopped systematic collection in the early 2000s

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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:

- Visitors are increasingly motivated to experience natural environments before climate change and disasters alter them permanently, creating **urgency-driven demand**

Challenges:

- Average temperatures have risen several degrees Fahrenheit during the rideable and hikeable season, and storm patterns have become **increasingly erratic** -- late-season snowfall, early rainfall, and prolonged dry spells are all increasing
- Climate unpredictability fundamentally **disrupts visitor planning**: people book PTO, flights, and accommodations months in advance and cannot easily adjust; one recent event saw 18 inches of snow fall after ski resorts had already closed, costing millions in lost revenue
- Ski resorts face **difficult staffing decisions** during warm periods when snow may or may not return, and outdoor retailers report that unpredictable conditions are affecting purchasing behavior
- **Reduced visitor confidence** translates directly to declining rural economic activity: less lodging, food, and service spending in communities that depend on it
- Climate funding decisions tend to favor projects in high-population areas, with money flowing disproportionately to the Central Valley, Bay Area, and Sacramento rather than **rural regions**

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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:

- The trail project generates a **broad, sustained bell curve of economic activity** rather than a construction boom-and-bust: local businesses can build tours, shuttles, fly fishing guide services, and cultural experiences around the route
- The Sierra Nevada has one of the **highest densities of trail builders** in California and the United States; trail contractors actively seek purposeful work, with businesses ranging from hundreds of thousands to five million dollars in scale
- Many small businesses collectively produce **sustained economic activity** that stays within the community rather than extracting value outward

Challenges:

- The Sierra Nevada has talented people broadly, but the most significant capacity constraint is at the tribal level: **tribal administrative capacity is a slowdown**, not a hard roadblock, but it affects collaboration timelines
- The region sits at the intersection of large public land holdings and checkerboarded private ownership, **complicating workforce development and economic planning**
- **Large capital incursions are uncommon** in the Sierra Nevada, limiting the scale and consistency of workforce and income growth; private equity dynamics that drive percentage increases elsewhere do not apply in the same way here

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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:

- **Cultural relationships with Indigenous tribes** on ancestral lands and multi-generational community members form the social and cultural foundation of the project, alongside its physical landscape
- **Relationships consistently accelerate projects**; no instances of relationships causing slowdowns have been observed
- True project roadblocks occur when a key stakeholder is not engaged until late in the process and then blocks progress; **early and ongoing inclusion is essential**
- ESSRP and Sierra Works regional working groups are cited as **helpful models of successful collaboration**
- **Working groups** must continue to receive funding: they are essential infrastructure for project advancement, not optional add-ons

Challenges:

- A **complex web of relationships** spans multiple land ownership types (National Park Service, Forest Service, BLM, State Parks, and private landowners) each with different timelines, priorities, and decision-making processes
- **Partners operating on different timelines** creates variable progress speed, though forward movement continues

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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:

- The project tells a **cohesive story** across the distinct narratives of small communities (Big Pine, Independence, Bishop, Mammoth, Tahoe, Calaveras, etc.) each with its own character, history, and culture
- The trail serves as a **pathway for teaching** geology, history, cultural history, and contemporary community life, using old maps, geologic surveys, fire towers, and landscape as teaching tools
- The goal is for visitors to leave with stories about the cultures and places they encountered, not just Strava files, a **purpose-driven identity** that is more compelling and durable than infrastructure alone
- Stories with **genuine community support** are more sustainable than physical infrastructure, which will eventually fail; funders and politicians are drawn to place-based narratives as vehicles for legacy
- It is easier to attach a foundation, brand, or government logo to a **compelling story** than to a piece of concrete

Challenges:

- No significant branding challenges identified.