




NATURAL LANDS

A Partnership for the Northern Sierra

How do you save a landscape you love? One Silicon Valley couple enlisted five conservation groups in a groundbreaking, entrepreneurial land-protection effort.

by William Poole



Becky and Jim Morgan disagree on which of them thought up their pioneering idea for conserving their favorite mountain landscape. “It was Jim’s idea,” she says—and he is just as sure that it was hers. They do agree on where and when the notion came up: in their kitchen in Los Altos Hills, California, in 2007.

For years, the Silicon Valley couple—he a retired technology company CEO, she a former county supervisor and state senator—had given money to a handful of nonprofit conservation groups working to protect the northern Sierra Nevada, where the couple owns a second home. They had gotten to know the staffs of these

nonprofits and admired their work. And on this day, as Becky was passing through the kitchen, Jim said to her (or maybe she said to him), “You know, if we get these guys working together, maybe they could do more.”

So was born the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP), five conservation nonprofits sharing strategy, leadership—and, most unusually, donors and funding—to prioritize and execute conservation projects across a five-million-acre swath of mountains, from south of Lake Tahoe north to Lassen Volcanic National Park. The groups include The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and The Nature Conservancy, on whose state board Jim serves; two local

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land trusts, the Truckee Donner Land Trust and the Feather River Land Trust; and the Sierra Business Council, which works to preserve the economies, communities, and ecosystems of the Sierra Nevada.

The goal: raise \$100 million in donations to leverage \$300 million in public funding and protect 100 million acres, either by buying land and transferring it to the U.S. Forest Service or state park and wildlife agencies, or by purchasing working forest and working ranching easements that allow sustainable forestry or cattle ranching but prevent the sale of the land for development.

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In May 2007, the Morgans assembled the partners in the Sacramento office of the Resources Legacy Fund Foundation, which is experienced in designing and helping to fund conservation initiatives. The state had recently passed a bond act that would add public funds to donated conservation dollars. “Now is the time,” Jim told the group. “The money is available and the need is there.”

The Morgans launched the effort with a commitment of \$10 million from their family foundation. The David and Lucile Packard Foundation kicked in \$10 million, and various other donors have since added \$10 million more. In October 2008, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger added the state’s stamp of approval to the partnership at a public event at Donner Lake, near Lake Tahoe. And U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein has been instrumental in securing federal support for the effort. Now in its third year, the NSP has three staff members, more than 10 projects under its belt, and many more in process.

Just as important, it is pioneering a new way for conservation groups to cooperate on protecting a large ecosystem. One of the first things the Morgans did was to



WILLIAM POOLE

Previous Page: As part of the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP), the Feather River Land Trust is working to protect 884-acre Heart K Ranch along Indian Creek, an important tributary of the Feather River. Above: In its NSP role, TPL recently acquired 480 acres including 100-foot Webber Lake Falls along the Little Truckee River for addition to Tahoe National Forest.



JIM GENSHEIMER/SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

Jim and Becky Morgan launched the NSP to protect the northern Sierra landscape their family had come to love.

look for models among other conservation partnerships across the country, but they found none with the level of cooperation they were seeking.

“We’re at the cutting edge of how conservation is being done,” says Dave Sutton, director of TPL’s Sierra Nevada program. “We’re creating it as we go along.”

A NEW LEVEL OF COOPERATION

In summary, the NSP is a coalition of groups that raises funds together and then distributes them for project use by its member organizations according to the conservation value assigned to each project. While it is not unusual for conservation groups to work together, it is almost unknown for them to pool zealously guarded donor lists to raise funds that may or may not go to their own work.

“It took awhile for the partners to get used to this idea,” says Perry Norris, executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust. “Then it gradually sank in that we would be so much better off in the partnership than going

it alone. For one thing, the NSP is such a grand vision that it captures the imagination of donors, who are much more likely to write a big check.”

Like the other groups, the Truckee Donner Land Trust continues to do projects outside the NSP framework—often smaller efforts, vital to the community but not necessarily regionally significant and thus unlikely to qualify for funding under the NSP’s formal prioritization scheme. On the other hand, last year the local land trust completed three projects using NSP funds, all of them in partnership with TPL. “NSP has greatly enhanced our capacity,” Norris says.

On a laptop computer in his San Francisco office, John Bernstein, the NSP’s president, calls up a brightly colored spreadsheet to demonstrate how the prioritization system works. Listed in the first column are a dozen or so projects proposed by one or another of the five member groups and currently under consideration for NSP funding. Succeeding columns hold scores for



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Above: Planned for protection by NSP members The Nature Conservancy and the Truckee Donner Land Trust, Independence Lake is home to one of only two remaining self-sustaining populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout. The lake's remote location has long preserved its pristine beauty, but the land is for sale and a likely target for development. Page 16: As part of its Sierra Checkerboard Initiative, TPL brought land along the South Yuba River into public ownership.

each project in various categories—resource value, threat abatement, financial leverage, strategic value—culminating in a total score that establishes the project's overall priority.

Who gets to assign the scores? All the partners do, in discussion. "This is the way we get from individual advocacy to an accepted ranking by the entire group," Bernstein says. "If a project doesn't rank high enough, it doesn't get funded."

NSP sponsorship and funding give the partnership significant credibility with government agencies, John Bernstein notes. "Agencies are used to nonprofits coming to them and saying, we've got a great deal for you and we'll put up 1 to 2 percent of the money," he says. "We're coming to them and saying, we'll fund 20 to 30 percent."

A REGION AT RISK

Jim and Becky Morgan met back east in the 1950s, as students at Cornell University in upstate New York. Becky, a Vermont farmer's daughter, taught Indiana-raised Jim how to ski in the hilly Northeast. After college, they came to California, where, beginning in the 1970s, Jim would help build Applied Materials into one of the world's leading semiconductor equipment companies. The couple—soon to be joined by two children, Jeff and Mary—began going to the northern Sierra to ski. "We just loved the out-of-doors," Becky says.

But in recent years the Morgans have grown ever more worried about the accelerating pressure of development on the Sierra's forests and waters. As the idea for the NSP took shape, they funded a master's degree student to meet







PHIL SCHERMEISTER



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One of the goals of the NSP is to create a greenbelt around booming Truckee, above. Key to that effort was the 2007 protection of 1,462-acre Waddle Ranch, in the Martis Valley just south of Truckee, by TPL and the Truckee Donner Land Trust (opposite page). The valley includes the kind of northern Sierra meadowlands often targeted for development.

By the Numbers: THE NORTHERN SIERRA NEVADA

- Rank of the Sierra Nevada in height and length among mountain ranges in the contiguous U.S.: **1**
- Percent of California native plants found in the Sierra Nevada: **50**
- Number of animal species found there: more than **400**
- Number of acres in the northern Sierra Nevada, from south of Lake Tahoe to Lassen Volcanic National Park, in millions: **5**
- Number of rivers arising in the northern Sierra: **6**
- Percent of Californians who draw at least some of their drinking water from these rivers: **65**
- Rank of the northern Sierra among California regions in the ability to support species as the climate changes: **1**
- Rank of the region's Sierra Valley among Sierra Nevada locations in abundance and diversity of birdlife: **1**
- Percent of northern Sierra land above 3,000 feet in public protection: **50**
- Percent of central and southern Sierra land above 3,000 feet in public protection: more than **90**
- Percent population increase in the northern Sierra since 1980: **300**
- Rank of the region's river meadows and other environmentally sensitive land as a desired location for development: **1**
- Affection of northern Sierra residents and visitors for the region's environment and history: **inestimable**

with the potential partner groups and feel them out on the plan. And they funded a study by The Nature Conservancy to help them better understand what might be needed.

The more they learned, the more concerned they became. For more than 150 years, the region's lakes, rivers, meadows, conifer-draped slopes, and granite peaks have served as a mountain playground for Californians and visitors from all corners of the globe. People come to ski, fish, hike, backpack, camp, rock climb, swim, boat, or simply enjoy the region's dramatic scenery.

But the region's value extends far beyond recreation. The six rivers that arise in the northern Sierra provide 65 percent of Californians with at least a portion of their drinking water while also supplying water to the growing cities of northwestern Nevada. Half of California's native plants are found in the northern Sierra, along with more than 400 animal species, including the greatest abundance and diversity of birds in the entire mountain range. No other part of California offers species a greater opportunity to survive in the face of climate change.

Other characteristics of the northern Sierra put these recreational, scenic, and environmental benefits at risk. Unlike the central and southern Sierra, whose high-elevation wilderness areas and world-famous national parks are largely isolated from major thoroughfares, the northern Sierra is served by a network of all-season highways, including Interstate 80—the only four-lane route across the Sierra. These roads put the heart of the region within a few hour's drive of the San Francisco Bay Area and burgeoning Central Valley cities.

Furthermore, a 19th-century federal policy that awarded every other square mile to companies building the transcontinental railroad left much of the landscape parceled into an illogical and difficult-to-manage "checkerboard" of public and private lands. The private land, long since acquired by forestry companies and increasingly targeted for development, includes some of the region's choice meadows, watersheds, high-elevation forests, and recreation areas. Development in the checkerboard could pollute rivers and streams and disrupt wildlife habitat and the movement of wildlife between adjoining public lands. And it is notoriously difficult and expensive to protect such development from wildfires.



"We're not trying to stop development, we're trying to do smart development based on all we now know about resource management," Jim Morgan says.

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL EXPERIMENT

Protecting the choicest checkerboard lands is the focus of TPL's Sierra Checkerboard Initiative, launched in 2001 with support from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the Bella Vista Foundation. It is also one of three initial goals of the NSP. The others are creating a green-belt around Truckee, the region's largest community, lying directly in the path of growth flowing north from around Lake Tahoe; and, farther north, protecting the headwater valleys of the Feather River, a key source of Californians' drinking water. Notable among these valleys is Sierra Valley, a stream-riddled expanse of ranching meadows that, at 130,000 acres, is the largest alpine valley in the Sierra Nevada and one of the largest in the nation.

To these efforts, each group brings its own skills and relationships. The Nature Conservancy brings expertise in conservation biology, climate science, and large-landscape conservation. The local land trusts bring

FAST FACTS: THE NORTHERN SIERRA PARTNERSHIP

Mission: To conserve the lands and waters of the northern Sierra Nevada and enhance its communities and local economies for future generations.

Partners: The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, Truckee Donner Land Trust, Sierra Business Council, Feather River Land Trust

Seed funding by: James and Rebecca Morgan Family Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

Fundraising goal: \$100 million in private donations to be matched by \$300 million in public funds

Private funds raised to date: \$30 million

Conservation goal: 100,000 acres

For more information, go to
www.northernsierrapartnership.org

irreplaceable local relationships, admirable track records of conservation, and knowledge of their home landscapes. The Sierra Business Council brings the credibility of an organization that sees conservation as a force for sustainable economic growth. And TPL brings a proven ability to raise public funds for conservation, a record of having protected close to 50,000 acres in the northern Sierra—more than any other conservation group—and decades-old relationships with important landowners.

Key among these landowners is the forestry company Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI), the region's largest private landholder, with whom TPL has done conservation projects for 20 years. "The trust and relationship we have with TPL underpins our ability to do business with the NSP," says SPI vice president for resources Dan Tomascheski, who first began visiting SPI lands now being considered for protection in the 1960s with his father, a forester.

Lands that might be considered for protection include high-elevation lands, which are somewhat less productive for forestry; areas with high public use adjoining public lands; and those with important biological or archaeological resources.

"We feel good about how we've taken care of these lands—proud that they are of interest to TNC and TPL,"



PHIL SCHERMEISTER

The protection of Perazzo Meadows, a 982-acre mosaic of meadows and wetlands along the Little Truckee River, conserves habitat for fish and wildlife while safeguarding water quality for California and northern Nevada. TPL and the Truckee Donner Land Trust partnered on the project.



ROBERT DURELL

Representatives of the NSP partner organizations flank behind partnership president John Bernstein. Left to right: Steve Frisch, of the Sierra Business Council, the Feather River Land Trust's Paul Hardy, Bernstein, Perry Norris of the Truckee Donner Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy's Greg Low, and Dave Sutton of The Trust for Public Land.

Tomascheski says. He appreciates that the NSP partners seem to understand that some protected lands need to include sustainable forestry, which preserves local jobs. "The NSP looks like it has potential for creating working landscapes. We feel good about doing more projects in the future."

No one knows whether the NSP will meet its 100,000-acre goal, but Jim and Becky Morgan are optimistic. While the economic downturn that began in 2008 may have slowed fundraising a little, it has also slowed development and made land available at lower prices, creating a once-in-a-generation opportunity for conservationists. And the partnership is fulfilling its promise as a model: two other organizations patterned on the NSP are now working to protect land in the southern Sierra and along the San Joaquin River.

Becky Morgan calls the NSP "an experiment—a Silicon Valley-type entrepreneurial endeavor." One

The region's lakes, rivers, meadows, conifer-draped slopes, and granite peaks have served as a mountain playground for Californians and visitors from all corners of the globe.

of the couple's hopes is that other Silicon Valley donors will understand the importance of protecting what Jim calls "one of the world's unique landscapes" right in their own backyard. "The Northern Sierra Partnership was the right opportunity at the right time with the right people," he says. "The partners see that by working together we have a real chance of pulling this off."

William Poole is the editor of Land&People.