

# Part I Why Watersheds

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The care and improvement of Sierra watersheds has been a key element of the Sierra Nevada Alliance’s work since its inception in 1993. Watersheds were featured at the 1996 annual conference titled, “Strategies for Living in the Watershed.” Attendees left that conference convinced that with the seed money provided by the sure passage of state Proposition 204, watershed restoration would be moved front and center on the agenda for the state resources agencies and for environmental and conservation groups active in the Sierra.

Luckily for the Alliance and its members, the political prognosticators were right! Proposition 204 did pass. And thanks to the Alliance’s credibility as an organization from the Sierra with

the interests of both the region’s resources and its communities at heart, we’ve been able to play a significant role in the newly emerging watershed restoration campaign.

The Alliance has built a constructive and positive dialogue



*Sierra Nevada Alliance’s annual conference at June Lake, CA*

with the Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC) to define and describe appropriate watershed restoration principles, as well as principles for community involvement in restoration programs.

These principles provide a framework for appropriate decision-making for potential watershed restoration programs and projects throughout the Sierra as well as in other foothill/mountain communities across the West.

### ***SNA-RCRC Watershed Restoration Principles***

Restoration must be consistent with watershed level assessment, analysis and evaluation; restoration includes protection of existing healthy conditions.

Restoration should ensure the preservation of existing healthy conditions by removing known threats and protecting from future threats.

Restoration must include eliminating continuing causes of watershed degradation.

Restoration should be staged, moving outward and downward, generally from the top of the watershed, from core healthy or restored areas; exceptions are limited to work designed to link core healthy areas.

Restoration projects should be prioritized within each watershed for effectiveness on the basis of maximum ecological benefit and on the benefits to sustainable local community economics and/or revitalization.

Restoration and stewardship decisions should be based on explicit objectives and benchmarks from an approved Watershed Restoration Strategic Plan.

Restoration that alters environments should give highest priority to project results that use natural processes.

Progress of restoration must be effectively monitored, using explicit objectives and benchmarks, in order to evaluate ongoing restoration and stewardship effort.

Restoration plans and/or projects must not sacrifice one ecosystem for another.

Restoration must be accomplished consistent with existing applicable environmental laws.

## ***Principles of Watershed Community Involvement***

Watershed strategic, annual, and project planning must be open, public, and involve communities in the watershed.

Community involvement must include a comprehensive and inclusive community public education component.

Watershed restoration and stewardship should reflect a strong component of sustainable local economics and/or revitalization of local communities implementing projects.

Advisory and/or oversight committees must include members residing in the watershed.

Watershed groups/JPAs administering restoration projects must deposit restoration funds in institutions that actively invest in local communities and economic revitalization within the Council's jurisdiction.

Watershed groups must adopt restoration strategies, and plans of action, that enhance and create local job and contracting opportunities.

Watershed policy, restoration and stewardship plans and projects must be consistent with principles and standards established by this [proposed State Watershed Restoration] act.

An outgrowth of the dialogue with RCRC is an effort by the Alliance and the rural counties to develop a state Watershed Restoration Act to secure additional funding for this important work. Such legislation, if passed, could put California on the same footing as other states, like Oregon, Idaho, and others, that have established state-supported programs for watershed restoration work and the creation of public-private watershed councils to develop and implement the actual restoration and enhancement projects.

Unfortunately some of California's downstream users are a bit slow to grasp the need for healthy watersheds above the many dams that separate Valley and coastal residents from the upper watershed areas in the foothills and mountains. But it's beginning to sink in that these upper watersheds could nurture some of the threatened and endangered fish species targeted for protection and do supply the majority of the state's drinking, irrigation, recreation and other water needs. The health of these upper watersheds is critical to the health and well-being of the rest of the state.

During these efforts, the Alliance has always strongly promoted the idea of using watershed councils to oversee development of watershed restoration plans and projects. Such watershed groups are common throughout the United States and have proven a successful vehicle for getting beyond often-divisive community rhetoric and actually working toward a more cohesive vision for the health of local communities.

But river systems are complex, as are the problems that affect them. That's why we need multi-stakeholder watershed councils comprising a solid contingent of local citizens with specific concerns and experience in their own watersheds to help craft the solutions. And that's why the Alliance has put together this *Toolkit* for local citizens and environmental groups who want to learn more about how to start a watershed council in their community.

