Lake Tahoe West Restoration Project

Scoping Notice / Notice of Preparation

El Dorado and Placer Counties, California

Release Date: April 10, 2020

To: California and Nevada State Clearinghouses, Cooperating Agencies, California Responsible and Trustee Agencies, Other Public Agencies, Interested Individuals and Organizations

Subject: Scoping Notice and Notice of Preparation for Joint Environmental Assessment / Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement

Introduction

The USDA Forest Service-Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU), California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy), and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) are proposing to prepare a joint environmental document for the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Project (Project). The LTBMU is proposing to prepare an Environmental Assessment pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (42 U.S. Code 4321 – 4347), the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations Implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500 – 1508), Forest Service Manual 1950, and Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. The Conservancy is proposing to prepare an Environmental Impact Report pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code Section 21000 et seq.) and the State CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations Section 15000 et seq.). TRPA is proposing to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement pursuant to the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact (Public Law 96-551), Code of Ordinances, and Rules of Procedure. This notice meets the federal noticing requirements for a scoping notice for an Environmental Assessment and the TRPA and CEQA noticing requirements for a Notice of Preparation.

This Scoping Notice / Notice of Preparation is intended to inform cooperating, responsible, trustee, and other affected or interested agencies and the public that a joint environmental document will be prepared to address potential environmental impacts resulting from implementation of the Project. Agencies should comment on the elements of potential environmental effects that are relevant to their statutory responsibilities in connection with the implementation of the proposed action (i.e., proposed project for CEQA purposes).

A brief description of the proposed action and alternatives likely to be evaluated in the joint environmental document, and a summary of the potential environmental effects of the proposed action (to the extent known), are included below.

Public Scoping Meetings

The purpose of this Scoping Notice / Notice of Preparation is to solicit views of interested persons, organizations, and agencies as they relate to the scope and content of the information to be included and analyzed in the environmental document.

Two public scoping meetings will be conducted to provide you with the opportunity to learn more about the proposed action and about the content of the environmental document. The LTBMU, Conservancy, and TRPA are concerned for the health and safety of community members and staff and must consider the obligation to continue work while doing our part to slow the spread of the novel Coronavirus. The scoping meetings will be conducted on a virtual platform on the following dates and times:

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
Governing Board Meeting
April 22, 2020
Check www.trpa.org on April 15, 2020 for link to virtual meeting.

USDA Forest Service
Lake Tahoe West Public Meeting
April 28, 2020 at 4:30 pm
Check https://go.usa.gov/xmgxT on April 15, 2020. Select "Lake Tahoe West." Under "Scoping" tab, please select "Virtual Meeting" document for more information.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Purpose and Need

The Lake Tahoe Basin's natural ecosystems and built environments are increasingly at risk from high-severity wildfire, drought, and insect and disease outbreaks. The changing climate, in combination with past land use practices, is expected to increase widespread tree mortality, severe impacts from smoke, and spread of invasive species, and to decrease carbon storage and lake clarity. Past land use practices, including fire suppression efforts, have resulted in overly dense forests and fuel accumulations, low quality wildlife habitat, and degraded watersheds that are less resilient (able to recover) after disturbance. For years, land management agencies have conducted restoration actions on federal and state lands within the Lake Tahoe Basin to improve ecological conditions. However, these actions are not improving ecosystem health and resilience fast enough or at a broad enough scale to keep pace with the threats posed by current stressors.

Because of the current threats, a multi-jurisdictional, landscape level approach to restoration is needed on federal, state, and some private lands to improve the resilience of Lake Tahoe's west shore landscape. The Basin's forested, riparian, and aquatic ecosystems need restoration to counter the effects of climate change, reduce fire risks, improve forest structure and diversity, increase beneficial fire on the landscape, protect and enhance habitats supporting native plants and animals, and protect lake clarity and stream flows. There is a need to improve habitat conditions and increase habitat resilience within Protected Activity Centers for the California spotted owl *(Strix occidentalis occidentalis)* and northern goshawk *(Accipiter gentilis)*. There is a need to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration including strategic placement of treatments and associated roads to create conditions that allow for an increased use of fire as a restoration tool and to reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire within the wilderness or from escaping from the wilderness. There is a need to increase forest resiliency to reduce the risk of greenhouse gas emissions from high severity fires and to build more resilient communities, recreation opportunities, and local economies.

Background

The Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership is a collaborative effort that formed in 2016 to focus on increasing the social-ecological resilience of forests, watersheds, recreational opportunities, and communities on the west shore of the Lake Tahoe Basin. Lake Tahoe West partners include government agencies with land management and regulatory responsibilities in the Lake Tahoe Basin, along with stakeholders representing

conservation groups, fire protection agencies, the recreation community, homeowners and businesses, scientists, local government, and others with a stake in the resilience of the west shore. The Partnership released a Landscape Resilience Assessment in 2017 and a Landscape Restoration Strategy in 2019 that together serve as the foundations for planning the proposed treatments within the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Project. For more information on the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership, the Landscape Resilience Assessment, and the Landscape Restoration Strategy, please visit LakeTahoeWest.org.

The Landscape Resilience Assessment evaluated the current state of resilience for a variety of landscape values and ecosystem services. Using the best available scientific data, it compared the current conditions of Lake Tahoe's west shore landscape to historic conditions and modern conditions in reference forests. Some of the values and services measured include forest densities, fire severity, water quality, human access, and native fish diversity. The Landscape Resilience Assessment concluded that Lake Tahoe's west shore forests and watersheds are not currently resilient to fire, drought, and climate change and that more intensive restoration efforts are needed across the broader landscape to achieve long-term desired conditions. The forests on Lake Tahoe's west shore are overly dense and uniform, leaving them vulnerable to high-severity wildfire, water stress exacerbated by droughts, and insect and disease outbreaks.

Using the results of the Landscape Resilience Assessment, landscape-specific modeling of different management and climate scenarios, and other best available science, the Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership developed the comprehensive Landscape Restoration Strategy. The Landscape Restoration Strategy provides a science-based framework to guide watershed and forest restoration approaches on Lake Tahoe's west shore over the next two decades to increase social-ecological resilience.

The Landscape Restoration Strategy identifies six goals (long-term desired conditions) for the landscape:

- Forests recover from fire, drought, and insect and disease outbreaks.
- Fires burn at primarily low to moderate severity and provide ecological benefits.
- Terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems support native species.
- Healthy creeks and floodplains provide clean water, complex habitat, and buffering from floods and droughts.
- People live safely with fire and enjoy and steward the landscape.
- Restoration is efficient, collaborative, and supports a strong economy.

Project Location

The Project Area for the Project comprises approximately 59,000 acres, including nearly all the western portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin (Figures 1a and 1b). The Project Area consists of multiple land ownerships, including 44,270 acres of National Forest System lands managed by the LTBMU, 8,950 acres of state-owned and managed lands, and 5,800 acres of private or local government lands. An interactive web map of the Project Area is available online at https://gis.trpa.org/laketahoewest/.

Proposed Action/Proposed Project

The proposed action would involve implementing restoration treatments to meet the purpose and need outlined above. Proposed actions are described below and include:

- Forest thinning.
- Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Basin-Wide Code Amendment.
- Biomass utilization and removal.

- Prescribed burning.
- Forest habitat restoration.
- Project-Specific Forest Plan Amendment (Protected Activity Centers).
- Reforestation.
- Meadow and aspen restoration.
- Aquatic habitat restoration.
- Stream restoration.
- Road and stream crossing actions.
- Forest Plan Amendment (Roads in Backcountry).
- Temporary forest closures and access considerations.

The extent and acreages of restoration treatments described and shown in the figures included herein are approximate. The locations of some actions such as forest thinning, removal of non-native fish, and stream channel reconstruction have been identified and are described below. Other actions would be considered throughout the entire Project Area. Within the Project Area, locations not currently identified for restoration treatments may be included as the environmental review proceeds. The proposed action would increase the current pace and scale of restoration on the west shore.

Several projects that involve similar restoration treatments are being implemented or evaluated within the Project Area under separate environmental review. For example, projects include the West Shore Wildland Urban Interface Hazardous Fuels Reduction and Forest Health Project on National Forest System lands (evaluated in a NEPA Categorical Exclusion), the Fuels Treatment and Understory Burning Project on lands managed by California State Parks (evaluated in a CEQA Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration), the Program Timberland Environmental Impact Report (currently being evaluated under CEQA), and the Liberty Resilience Corridor (evaluated in a NEPA Categorical Exclusion). Figures 2a and 2b show the portions of the Project Area associated with these projects and evaluated under separate environmental documentation. The environmental document being prepared for this Project will not duplicate previous analyses.

Forest Thinning

The proposed action would involve thinning approximately 19,500 acres within the Project Area to reduce overly dense forest stands, improve species composition and regeneration, reduce fuel accumulations in forest understories, increase forest heterogeneity (e.g., multiple tree species and age classes, variable tree spacing, small forest openings, vertical complexity), facilitate the growth of mid-seral forests toward late seral conditions, reduce conifer encroachment in riparian ecosystems, promote snowpack retention, and allow for ecologically beneficial fire to occur on the landscape. Figures 2a and 2b show the locations within the Project Area where thinning is proposed. No thinning is proposed in wilderness areas.

Thinning activities proposed near communities and in strategic locations would prioritize fire and fuel objectives. Thinning activities that are farther from communities would prioritize restoration of forest structure, composition, wildlife habitat, and conditions that allow for beneficial fire. Forest thinning treatments would consider forest type and site capacity characteristics such as water table, aspect, topographic position, and soil type. Existing large trees would be conserved; however, there may be limited instances where removal of trees 30 inches or greater in diameter at breast height would be necessary to achieve restoration objectives. For example, a large tree may be considered for treatment if it is diseased, insect-infested, or competing with existing larger trees.

The proposed action would involve implementing thinning treatments on approximately 2,500 acres per year, which would more than double current annual treatment levels across National Forest Service lands.

Thinning treatments would occur as follows:

- Approximately 16,500 acres would be thinned using ground-based mechanical equipment. Cut material would be removed to a landing for processing. Biomass utilization and removal is described below.
- Approximately 3,000 acres would be thinned using hand crews. Due to slope constraints, cut material would be piled and burned or removed with aerial methods (helicopter removal or cable yarding).
- The treatment acreages above include approximately 5,400 acres located within National Forest System lands designated as Backcountry Management Area. There are approximately 3,200 acres of this Backcountry Management Area that are also lands identified as Inventoried Roadless Areas. Treatment in the Roadless Area will follow the guidelines described in the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule (https://www.fs.fed.us/emc/nepa/roadless/2001RoadlessRuleFR.pdf).

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Basin-Wide Code Amendment

The proposed action would use ground-based mechanical equipment for thinning treatments on slopes up to 50 percent (Figures 3a and 3b). Chapter 61 of the TRPA Code of Ordinances (https://www.trpa.org/regional-plan/code-of-ordinances/) prohibits mechanized equipment on slopes greater than 30 percent. TRPA proposes a Basin-wide amendment to its Code of Ordinances to allow ground-based mechanical equipment on slopes up to 50 percent under the appropriate circumstances. The use of ground-based mechanical equipment as opposed to hand thinning would allow managers to remove trees greater than 14 inches in diameter at breast height to meet restoration objectives and to reduce the number of piles that would be burned. This would allow managers to reduce smoke emissions associated with pile burns and increase opportunities for biomass utilization that can provide long-term carbon storage and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It may also increase the pace and scale of thinning treatments.

Approximately 20 percent of the Project Area consists of slopes between 30 and 50 percent that may benefit from ground-based mechanical thinning. The environmental document will consider the effects of using ground-based mechanical treatment within those areas as well as the entire Lake Tahoe Basin. Future projects outside of the Project Area may require additional analysis to show that on-site conditions are appropriate for ground-based mechanical treatment on slopes up to 50 percent.

Biomass Utilization and Removal

Within the Project Area, the proposed action would remove and/or process forest biomass (e.g., logs, limbs, tops, and understory vegetation) created from restoration treatments. Biomass may be chipped, masticated, or lopped and scattered on-site to decompose slowly over time or be disposed of through in-forest pile or broadcast burning. Biomass may also be processed on-site into sawlogs, firewood, chips, biochar, or other products using existing or emerging technologies (e.g., heat and electricity co-generation, pyrolysis, and gasification) and/or hauled to a utilization facility to be processed into long-lived durable wood products (e.g., lumber, veneer, and mass timber), short-lived products (e.g., mulch and animal bedding), or to be used for energy production. These actions are an alternative to burning fuels on site and would reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with fuel reduction treatments. Some emerging on-site technologies may require supplemental analysis to be permitted per Chapter 65 of the TRPA Code of Ordinances (https://www.trpa.org/regional-plan/code-of-ordinances/). Each method of biomass disposal and utilization has different levels of carbon storage and emissions and potential substitution benefits (i.e., displacing fossil fuel-based energy and materials). This Project may include the construction of one or more central staging area(s) for materials storage and processing.

Prescribed Burning

The proposed action would involve the use of strategically placed prescribed burning within the Project Area, including wilderness areas, to establish a more frequent fire interval, restore fire-adapted ecosystem processes and species, and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire by reducing forest fuel accumulations, maintaining reduced fuel loads, and creating and maintaining forest openings. Prescribed burning would include burning of slash piles created during restoration treatments and/or broadcast burning to meet restoration objectives. Locations for prescribed burning include: forest, meadow, and aspen ecosystems where the use of fire would result in ecologically beneficial effects; locations that can act as a primary firebreak treatment where thinning is not required to successfully implement burning treatments; and/or, where recent thinning treatments have been implemented. Prescribed burning treatments would only be conducted when conditions meet approved burn plan requirements for risk mitigation and comply with relevant air quality regulations. Prescribed burning may be used as an independent treatment or coordinated with other restoration treatments described in the proposed action. The proposed action would involve implementing approximately 2,000 acres of prescribed burning per year. The acres of prescribed burning would increase as forest thinning treatments are completed across the Project Area to a level that allows for safe and effective management of fire.

Forest Habitat Restoration

The proposed action would enhance the quality, connectivity, and resilience of habitat for species associated with old-growth forest conditions, such as California spotted owls *(Strix occidentalis occidentalis)*, northern goshawks *(Accipiter gentilis)*, and Pacific marten *(Martes caurina)*. Forest habitat restoration would focus on maintaining and promoting old-growth forest characteristics that can support nesting, denning, and foraging. Restoration would be intended to:

- Facilitate the retention and growth of tall and large trees.
- Support appropriate densities of shrubs, saplings, and large downed wood in a variety of decay classes.
- Promote the growth over time of overstory tree canopy cover.
- Increase horizontal and vertical complexity in forest structure.
- Retain trees with complex structure.
- Retain and recruit snags of different heights, sizes, and decay classes.
- Reduce the risk of habitat loss from fire.

Specific treatments to increase habitat resilience, connectivity, and quality could include actions such as thinning (Figures 2a and 2b), prescribed burning, snag creation, and understory fuels reduction. Consistent with existing policy in the Lake Tahoe Basin, there may be limited circumstances where a tree greater than 30 inches in diameter at breast height may be treated, felled, or removed to improve growing conditions for large trees. For example, a large tree may be considered for treatment if it is diseased, insect-infested, or competing with existing larger trees. Prescribed burning would be prioritized where conditions can support a desired mix of fire severity effects that retain and promote old-growth forest elements such as large live trees as well as large diameter downed wood and a shrub component in the understory. Species-specific habitat enhancement techniques would be evaluated as part of the proposed action.

Improving forested habitat for wildlife benefit could occur throughout the Project Area but would prioritize degraded habitat and habitat in wildlife territories with decreased occupancy or a lapse in reproductive activity. Restoration could occur in designated California spotted owl and northern goshawk Protected Activity Centers, spotted owl Home Range Core Areas, and Pacific marten territories (Figures 4a and 4b). Treatments would be intended to improve the resilience, condition, and connectivity of these sensitive areas without

compromising the function of the habitat for the species. Protected Activity Centers represent a portion of an owl's and goshawk's possible territory size. Treatments could occur within, around, and between known wildlife territories to enhance reproductive habitat. Treatments would be strategically staggered in both space and time to not treat an entire territory at one time. The specific locations for treatment would be selected based on the existing habitat condition, connectedness to prioritized areas, and sensitive nature of an area. Indicators of degraded habitat condition include: (1) an over- or under-representation of large snags and downed woody debris; (2) a high density of small- and medium-sized codominant trees in stands with larger diameter codominant trees (greater than 24 inches diameter at breast height); and, (3) a lack of variability in tree/snag size classes and distribution (i.e., lacks natural clumps and small gaps).

Treatments could also occur within and adjacent to existing late-seral forests if management actions would help maintain and improve nesting and denning habitat elements and overall vertical structural complexity. Restoration in late-seral forests would emphasize the restoration intentions in the bulleted list above. Prescribed burning would be the preferred tool where fire can safely achieve ecological benefits.

Nearly all of the Protected Activity Centers occur within the Wildland Urban Interface where the protection of communities is paramount (Figures 4a and 4b). The proposed action would improve habitat condition and resilience in Protected Activity Centers that occur within the Wildland Urban Interface. Forest thinning and prescribed burning are generally allowed in Protected Activity Centers in the Wildland Urban Interface but with restrictions that protect habitat structure and function for the species. Treatments in these locations would continue to balance the needs of community protection and those of the species.

Project-Specific Forest Plan Amendment (Protected Activity Centers)

The LTBMU Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ltbmu/landmanagement/planning) provides the guidance for managing and protecting resources on National Forest System lands. Treatments in portions of Protected Activity Centers within the Wildland Urban Interface would comply with the Forest Plan, which allows forest thinning and prescribed burning with restrictions. Under the Forest Plan, prescribed burning and small tree thinning can be used in Protected Activity Centers outside of the Wildland Urban Interface; however, cutting trees greater than six inches in diameter at breast height is not permitted. There may be circumstances in these Protected Activity Centers outside of the Wildland Urban Interface when fire cannot be safely applied without first cutting larger trees.

Outside of the Wildland Urban Interface, a project-specific Forest Plan amendment may be proposed to allow activities within the boundaries of three California spotted owl Protected Activity Centers and four northern goshawk Protected Activity Centers to allow forest restoration treatments like tree thinning, snag creation, and understory fuels reduction. A proposed amendment of Standard 96 of the Forest Plan would allow for hand or mechanical removal of trees greater than 6-inch diameter at breast height to achieve forest habitat restoration not limited to surface and ladder fuels within these seven Protected Activity Centers. Restoration actions would comply with all other guidance in the Forest Plan. The LTBMU does not propose to change the descriptions or management guidance for Protected Activity Centers within the Forest Plan.

The Forest Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.13) describes the way in which Forest Plan amendments must be analyzed. The Responsible Official must determine which substantive requirements (CFR 219.8-219.11) are applicable to the proposed amendment. The LTBMU believes that the following substantive requirements are directly related to this proposed Forest Plan amendment:

- 36 CFR 219.8 – Sustainability (a) Ecological sustainability (1) Ecosystem Integrity.
- 36 CFR 219.9 – Diversity of plant and animal communities. (b) Additional, species-specific plan components [Protected Activity Centers]

Reforestation

Throughout the Project Area, the proposed action would consider reforestation to promote or maintain species and genetic diversity. Reforestation would contribute to structural diversity including tree size and age, and species diversity, which may help forests be more resilient to drought and future disturbances. Reforestation prescriptions would incorporate appropriate stocking density, species mix, and seed source (e.g., location/elevation, white pine blister rust resistant), and consider current and anticipated site capacity characteristics (e.g., annual precipitation, water table, aspect, topographic position, and soil type).

Meadow and Aspen Restoration

The proposed action would involve restoring meadows and aspen forests in the Project Area (Figures 5a and 5b) to improve overall condition where it may be degraded, enhance habitat condition for native species, and improve resilience to changing climate conditions such as increased flooding from rain-on-snow events. Currently, approximately 800 acres of meadow and 400 acres of aspen forests are identified in the Project Area, all of which could be treated with the proposed action. Proposed restoration treatments could increase the acreages of meadows and aspen forests.

Meadows and aspen forests in a degraded condition would be prioritized for restoration. Some indicators of degraded meadow and aspen forest conditions include: a high density of conifer trees, the presence of stream channel incision or bank instability, extensive areas of bare soil in meadows, lack of regeneration of aspen, high mortality of mature aspen, presence of invasive species, and drying meadow conditions.

Specific restoration actions would be identified based on site-specific conditions and could include removing conifers, stabilizing stream head cuts, prescribed burning, removing invasive species, planting native species, and/or re-routing or improving drainage on trails. All conifers could be removed from meadows and aspen forests, including trees greater than 30 inches in diameter at breast height. Some conifers could be left standing as snags or be felled and left as downed wood to create wildlife habitat. The proposed action would restore approximately 100 acres of aspen habitat and 200 acres of meadow every five years.

Aquatic Habitat Restoration

The proposed action would restore habitat in specific west shore streams, lakes, and ponds for the federally threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii henshawi)* and endangered Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*) by removing non-native species (Figure 5b) that are known to prey upon, compete with, and/or hybridize with Lahontan cutthroat trout and Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. Manual removal methods (e.g., backpack electrofishing, gillnets) would be used to remove non-native trout. No chemical methods are proposed. Treatments would be multi-year using a phased approach beginning in the uppermost watersheds. Manmade, temporary barriers may be needed if natural barriers are not available to divide the treatment area into achievable phases. These barriers (natural or manmade) are needed to ensure non-native species cannot move upstream into treated areas. Identified treatment watersheds include:

- Eagle Creek drainage: The proposed treatment area includes four named lakes (Dicks, Upper Velma, Middle Velma, and Fontanillis), associated unnamed lakes and ponds, and two miles of Eagle Creek above an existing barrier to fish passage. Fish removal would restore habitat for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. These waterbodies are in occupied habitat and adjacent to designated critical habitat.
- Meeks Creek drainage: The proposed treatment includes six named lakes (Stony Ridge, Rubicon, Crag, Hidden, Shadow, and Genevieve), associated unnamed lakes and ponds, and approximately eight miles of stream to the State Route (SR) 89 bridge. Fish removal would restore habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout and Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. This watershed was likely historic habitat for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog. The watershed is identified as a high priority recovery watershed for

Lahontan cutthroat trout by The Tahoe Basin Recovery Implementation Team. The Washoe Tribe of California and Nevada also identified the watershed for native species restoration.

Stream Restoration

Throughout the Project Area, the proposed action would restore streams that are lacking large woody debris or stream shade, have increased water temperatures, and/or have eroding beds and banks. Additionally, the proposed action would restore floodplains that are lacking roughness and vegetative cover (Figures 5a and 5b). Restoration treatments could include strategically placing large woody debris in stream channels and/or floodplains, planting riparian vegetation, and adding substrate (e.g., gravel, cobble, boulders) to streams. Proposed restoration treatments are intended to increase stream bed and bank stability, improve habitat conditions for native riparian dependent species, provide locations of climate refugia, increase floodplain connectivity, maintain or improve stream flow, and improve water quality. Restoration treatments may involve the use of heavy equipment and the construction of temporary roads and staging areas.

Restoration treatments involving full channel reconstruction would occur where stream channel conditions are degraded such that it is disconnected from its floodplain and/or where channel bed and bank instability are widespread and unlikely to be repaired using the methods described above. Treatments would be identified based on site-specific conditions and include, but are not limited to, the following currently identified locations:

- Approximately one mile of stream restoration involving full channel reconstruction will be completed on Blackwood Creek over two miles of the stream channel (Figure 6).
- Approximately one half (0.5) mile of stream restoration involving full channel reconstruction would be completed in the Ward Creek watershed (Figure 7).

Road and Stream Crossing Actions

The proposed action would involve constructing permanent and/or temporary classified roads and landings to implement restoration treatments and would consider realigning road segments when existing roads are located in meadows, stream environment zones, and other sensitive or undesired locations. The proposed action would not change the allowed uses for existing roads and trails. The need for and location of temporary and permanent roads and landings would be evaluated; recommendations for these features would be based on an analysis of the existing access to treatment units using the current road network and access. Road/trails design would comply with agency policy and best management practices.

The proposed action would also upgrade stream crossings within the Project Area to improve flow, limit erosion, and allow for aquatic organism passage. Culverts and channel crossings would be evaluated and prescribed specific actions to improve conditions on a case-by-case basis, such as when roads are being used to implement restoration actions or when crossing impairments are identified. The proposed action would maintain existing barriers that prevent movement of non-native aquatic species until they have been eradicated where native aquatic species restoration is proposed.

Forest Plan Amendment (Roads in Backcountry)

The LTBMU Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ltbmu/landmanagement/planning) provides the guidance for managing and protecting resources on National Forest System lands. The Forest Plan states: "Suitable uses do not include construction of permanent roads" in Backcountry Management Areas. The plan continues by saying: "Backcountry lands may be occasionally influenced by management activities to support forest health, improve habitat, and reduce fuels." A Forest Plan amendment may be proposed to allow for construction of new permanent roads to support forest health, improve habitat and reduce fuels. Any new permanent roads would

be for administrative use to support future restoration actions and not open to public motorized wheeled vehicle use.

The Forest Planning Rule (36 CFR 219.13) describes the way in which Forest Plan amendments must be analyzed. The Responsible Official must determine which substantive requirements (CFR 219.8-219.11) are applicable to the proposed amendment. The LTBMU believes that the following substantive requirements are directly related to this proposed Forest Plan amendment:

- 36 CFR 219.8 – Sustainability (a) Ecological sustainability (1) Ecosystem Integrity.

Temporary Forest Closures and Access Considerations

The proposed action would involve implementing temporary forest closures during project activities when needed for public safety. Alternate staging areas and access points would be considered to reduce impacts to recreation.

Performance Standards and Resource Protection Measures

Performance standards will be developed to describe the desired function or performance of a post-restoration landscape feature (e.g., meadow, stream reach, channel crossing, wildlife habitat) or process (e.g., water flow). They are intended to guide restoration actions to meet the outcome while providing flexibility in the specific design or method of restoration. Because methodologies and technologies to implement an action have the potential to improve over time, performance standards allow for flexibility to utilize new technologies to achieve the same intended outcome. Performance standards can also help guide adaptive management of a project.

A sample set of performance standards related to the strategic placement of large wood in a stream channel may include:

- Log placement does not impede more than 30 percent of the bank full channel.
- Log placement creates natural patterns of sediment scour and deposition.
- Logs would be placed in such a way that flow is deflected away from banks that are at risk of erosion.

The environmental document will identify resource protection measures and best management practices to avoid, eliminate, or reduce unintended and undesirable effects of the proposed actions on sensitive resources. Example resource protection measures and best management practices include:

- Prescribed burning activities would comply with air quality standards and restrictions.
- Maintain limited operating periods for federally-listed and Forest Service sensitive wildlife species.
- Wash all equipment and vehicles before moving into the Project Area to ensure that the equipment is free of soil, seeds, vegetative material, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds of invasive plant species.
- Temporary roads would be out-sloped to ensure that effective drainage is maintained.
- Restoration treatments would generally occur during the grading season, between May 1 and October 15. A grading extension may be requested from TRPA, and winter operations may occur when conditions allow.

Proposed Alternatives

In addition to the proposed action described above, a No project/No action alternative will be analyzed in the environmental document, where no new restoration work would occur, and currently planned restoration work would continue. At least one more action alternative that meets the purpose and need of this Project is anticipated. Public input is sought during this scoping period on alternative strategies or approaches, such as the extent of prescribed burning, the pace, scale, or location of restoration actions, and performance standards or resource protection measures.

Environmental Effects Analysis

The potential environmental effects analyzed in the joint environmental document will include the following resource areas:

- Air Quality: The analysis will address the potential air pollutant emissions from the restoration treatments, including emissions associated with prescribed burns, use of off-road equipment, biomass transport and utilization, and vehicle trips.
- Biological Resources: The analysis will address the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the restoration treatments on habitat for: Forest Service sensitive terrestrial, aquatic, and botanical species; Forest Service watch list plant species; possible introduction of invasive species; migratory birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act; species and critical habitat designated under the Federal and State Endangered Species Acts; and, TRPA special interest species and uncommon plant communities.
- Climate Change and Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Although forested lands can remove carbon dioxide, the most prominent greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere and sequester it in soil and vegetation, severe wildfire can cause these lands to emit more carbon dioxide than they store. The analysis will assess the potential impacts related to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change from the restoration treatments proposed by the Project, as well as long-term changes in carbon sequestration.
- Cultural Resources: The analysis will assess the potential for adverse effects to historical and archaeological resources from proposed treatment activities. Tribal concerns regarding potential Traditional Cultural Properties, sacred sites, and impacts on traditional practices such as the harvest of medicinal plants will also be addressed.
- Energy: The analysis will address the potential energy use of the Project, including from the consumption of energy by worker commute trips, haul truck trips, and motorized equipment used during treatment activities, as well as the potential for the use of biomass to generate electricity. The potential depletion of any non-renewable natural resource will also be addressed.
- Forest Resources: The analysis will address whether the restoration treatments, when implemented over the long-term, may convert forest land to non-forest uses.
- Geology, Soils, Land Capability, and Coverage: The analysis will address the effects on soil conditions or contribution to excessive soil erosion from Project activities, stream crossings, road maintenance, vegetation removal, and heavy equipment operation.
- Hazards, Public Health, and Safety: The analysis will address hazards from implementing the proposed restoration treatments, including the potential for accidental release or exposure of people, including sensitive receptors, to hazardous materials resulting from the use of motorized vehicles, heavy equipment, and small motorized equipment.

- Hydrology and Water Quality: The analysis will address the potential impacts on streamflow patterns, groundwater hydrology, and water quality from restoration treatments, including vehicle access, use of landings, road and stream crossing upgrades, timber yarding, and transport of forest products.
- Noise: The analysis will address the potential noise and vibration impacts from implementation of restoration treatments. The Project activities will involve the use of mechanized equipment, including aerial methods involving the use of helicopter or cable yarding, and hauling activity that could result in temporary noise. Additionally, some mechanical thinning operations could have the potential to produce ground vibration.
- Recreation: The analysis will address the short-term and long-term potential effects of the Project on recreation resources, including effects on the quality of recreational experiences, temporary displacement of recreational uses and special events, and changes in the public accessibility of treated sites.
- Scenic Resources: The analysis will address the short-term and long-term effects of implementing the Project on views in the Project Area from scenic vistas, Lake Tahoe, public viewpoints, TRPA-designated scenic roadway units in Placer and El Dorado Counties, and along State Route 89, which is an officially designated state scenic highway.
- Social and Economic Effects: The joint environmental document will include a high-level analysis of the social and economic effects of implementing the Project where the effects would relate to a physical change in the environment. The discussion will focus on potential revenue generation associated with any commercial activities and other socioeconomic implications of implementing the Project. The document will also evaluate whether the proposed action would result in disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations in accordance with Executive Order 12898.
- Transportation: The analysis will address the potential for vehicle trips associated with worker commute and truck haul trips involved with transporting biomass or sawlogs to contribute to exceedance of vehicle miles traveled standards. The joint environmental document will also address the potential for traffic from restoration treatments to exceed the capacity of neighborhood streets or present a safety hazard to local residents.
- Wildfire: The environmental document will evaluate the effects on wildfire and associated hazards, including the potential for impairment of emergency response or evacuation plans, exacerbation of wildfire risks, and exposure of people or structures to significant risks associated with post-fire conditions. The potential risks associated with prescribed burning operations included in the Project would also be assessed.

The State CEQA Guidelines (Section 15128) allow an Environmental Impact Report to identify environmental effects that were determined to not be significant and to briefly describe the reasons. Such effects will be dismissed from detailed review in the joint environmental document and would include agriculture, land use and planning, mineral resources, population and housing, public services, and utilities and service systems.

Lead Agencies Contact Information:

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, USDA Forest Service
35 College Drive
South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150
Contact: Brian Garrett
Assistant Vegetation Management Staff Officer
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Email: brian.garrett@usda.gov

California Tahoe Conservancy
1061 Third Street
South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150
Contact: Christine Aralia
Senior Environmental Scientist
Phone: (530) 543-6017
Fax: (530) 543-2869
Email: Christine.aralia@tahoe.ca.gov

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
P.O. Box 5310
128 Market Street
Stateline, NV 89449
Contact: Shannon Friedman
Senior Planner
Phone: (775) 589-5205
Fax: (775) 588-4527
Email: sfriedman@trpa.org

How to Comment

The LTBMU will maintain and be responsible for the handling of public comments submitted in connection with this notice. Please address questions about the use, handling, and potential disclosure of information submitted in public comments to their contact person above.

The project is on the LTBMU's Projects webpage at https://go.usa.gov/xmgxT (if link does not work, please copy and paste into your browser). You can also find it on the LTMBU's Forest home page, refer to the left hand column under "Land and Resources Management," then "Projects." Once on the LTBMU Projects webpage, scroll down to "Under Analysis" and select "Lake Tahoe West."

To Comment: On the "Lake Tahoe West" project webpage and under the right-hand column heading "Get Connected," select "Comment/ Object on Project."

Personal contact information is optional, though you are required to enter an email address in the electronic Comment form.

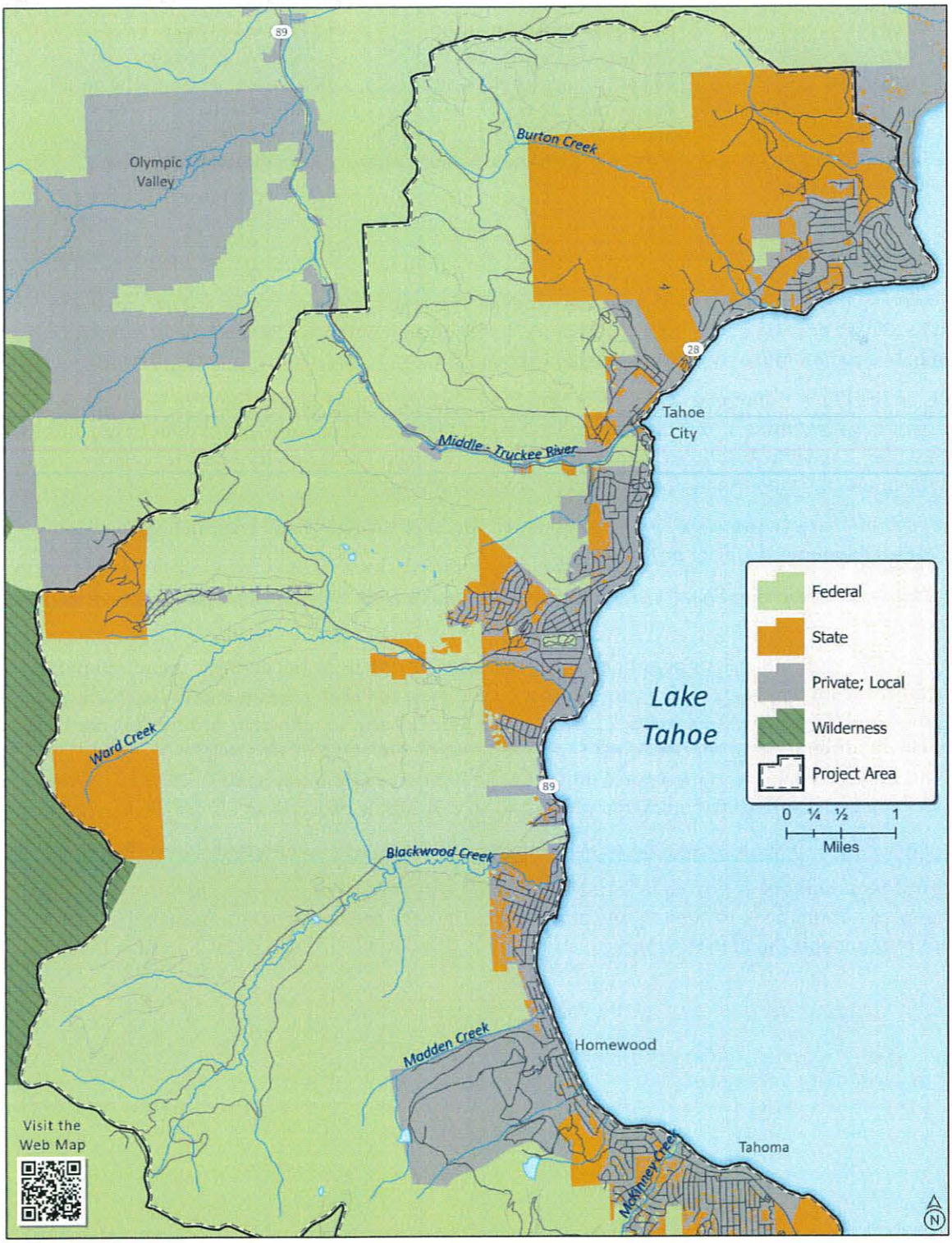
Please note, however, only individuals or entities who have submitted their name, address, email and phone number, if available, with their substantive comments will be eligible to file an objection later regarding this project with the Forest Service (36 CFR 218.5, 218.8, and 219.54). Please also note your comments and contact information will be considered part of the Forest Service's public record and may be available for public inspection. This project will be developed pursuant to the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) and is subject to comment pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B, and 36 CFR 219.

Postal comments: Brian Garrett, Re: Lake Tahoe West, LTBMU, 35 College Dr., South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150.

Comments must be submitted or posted by 11:59 p.m. on 5/11/20 (PDT). Commenters should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. It is the commenter's responsibility to ensure timely receipt of comments (36 CFR 218.25).

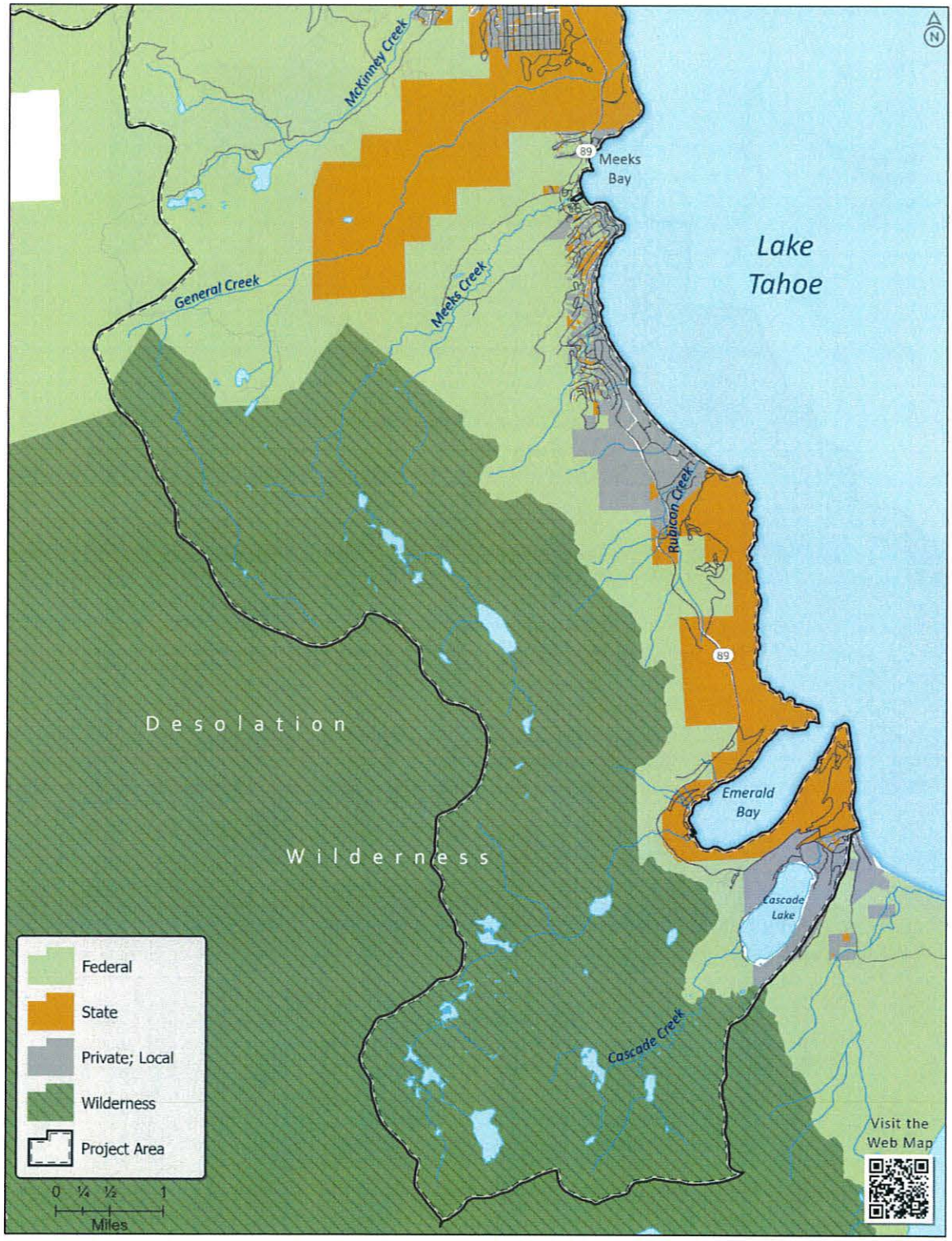
Figures

Figure 1a – Project Area (North)



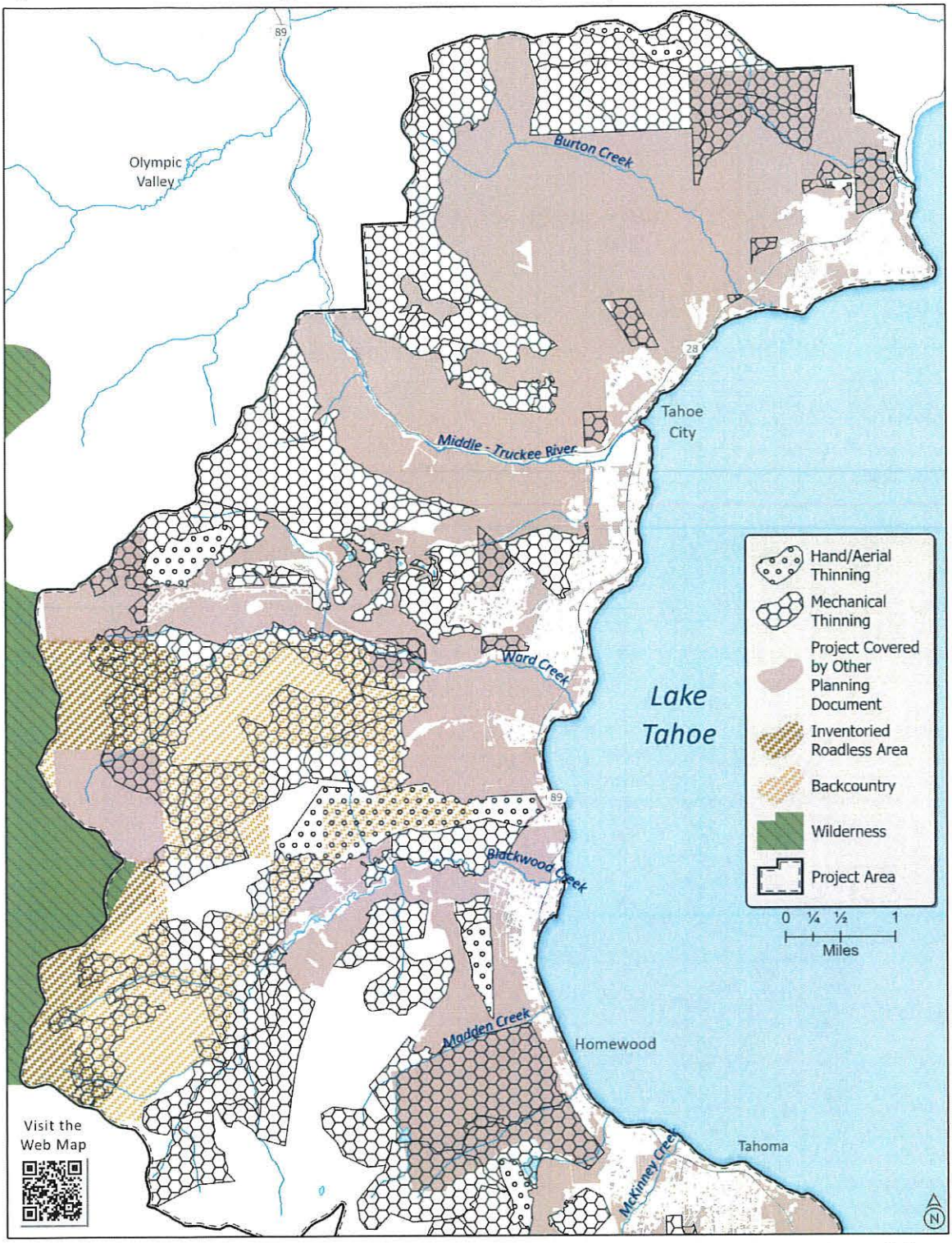
Land ownership within the Lake Tahoe West Project Area (approximately 59,000 acres) includes a combination of National Forest System lands, state-owned lands, and private or local government lands.

Figure 1b – Project Area (South)



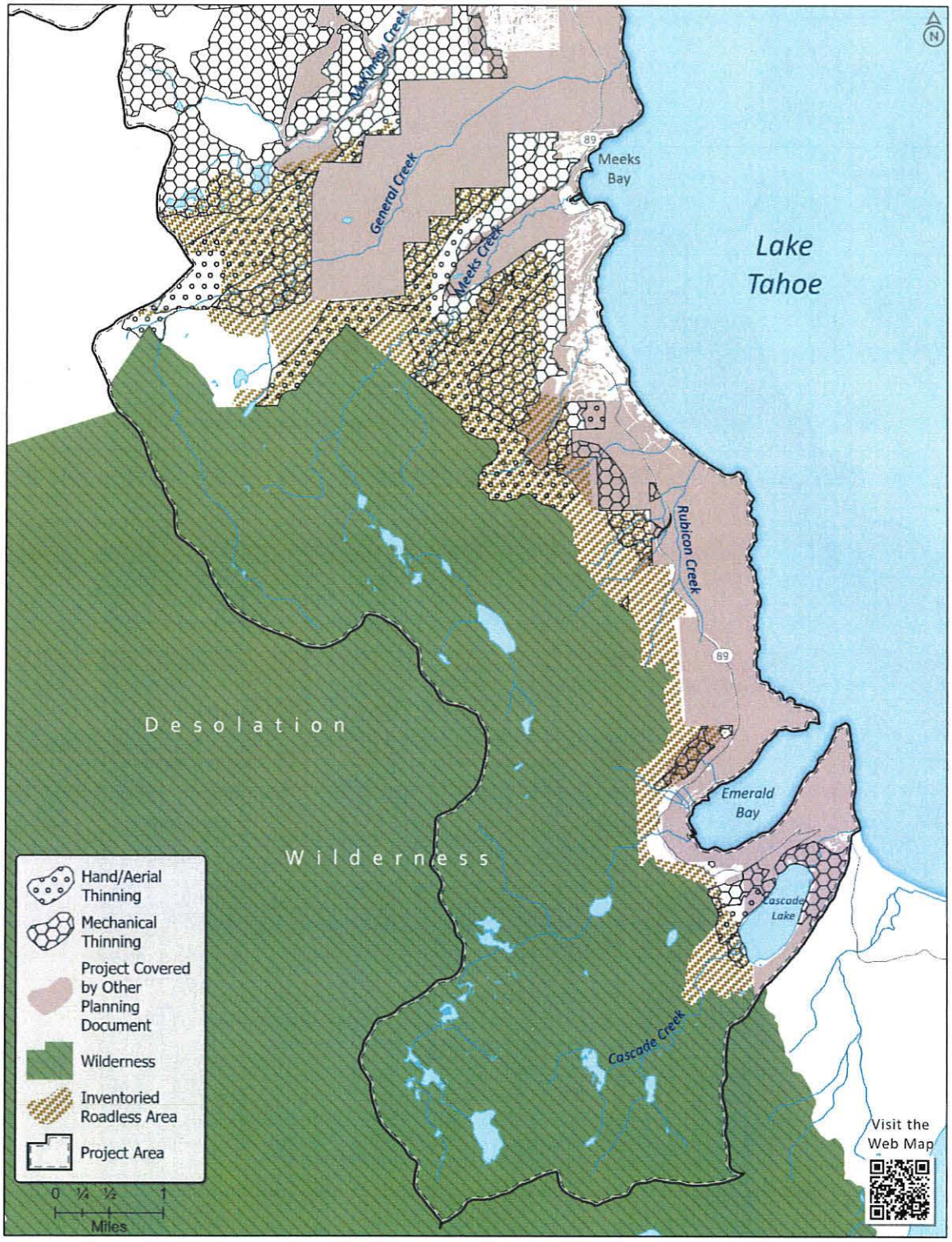
Land ownership within the Lake Tahoe West Project Area (approximately 59,000 acres) includes a combination of National Forest System lands, state-owned lands, and private or local government lands.

Figure 2a – Forest Thinning Treatment Locations (North)



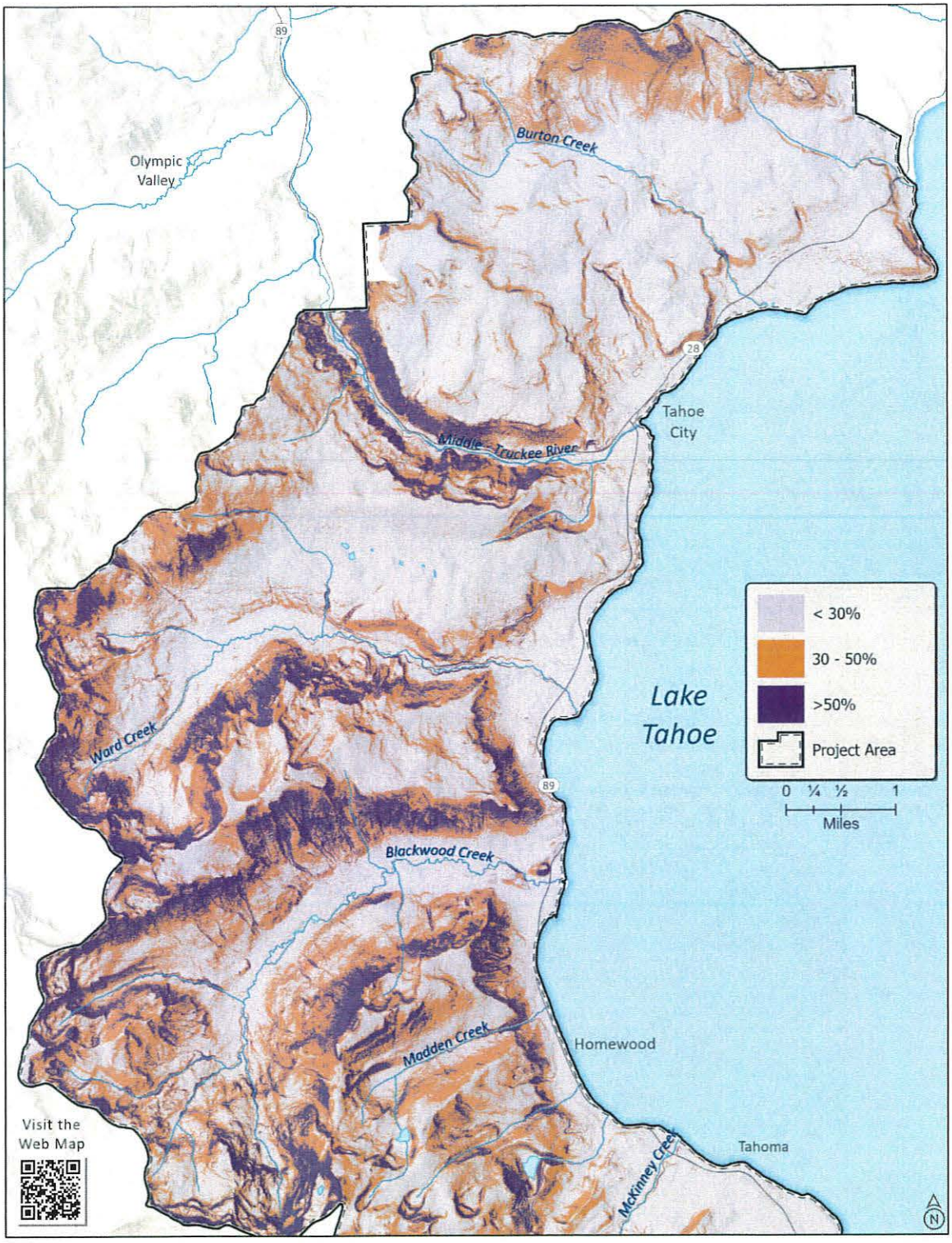
The proposed action would enhance forest conditions through thinning treatments. Portions of the Project Area are associated with other restoration projects and evaluated under separate documentation.

Figure 2b – Forest Thinning Treatment Locations (South)



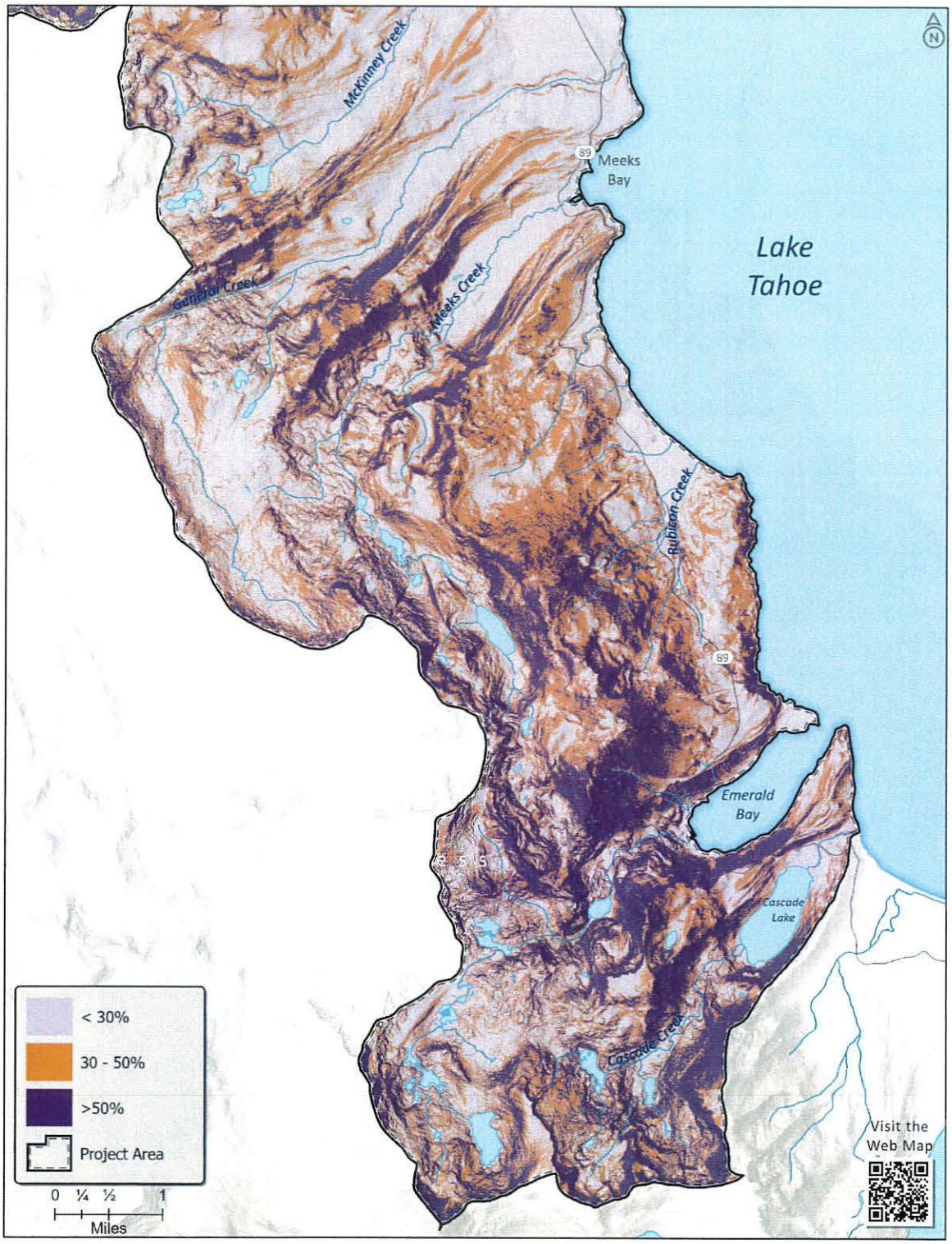
The proposed action would enhance forest conditions through thinning treatments. Portions of the Project Area are associated with other restoration projects and evaluated under separate documentation.

Figure 3a – Slopes in Project Area (North)



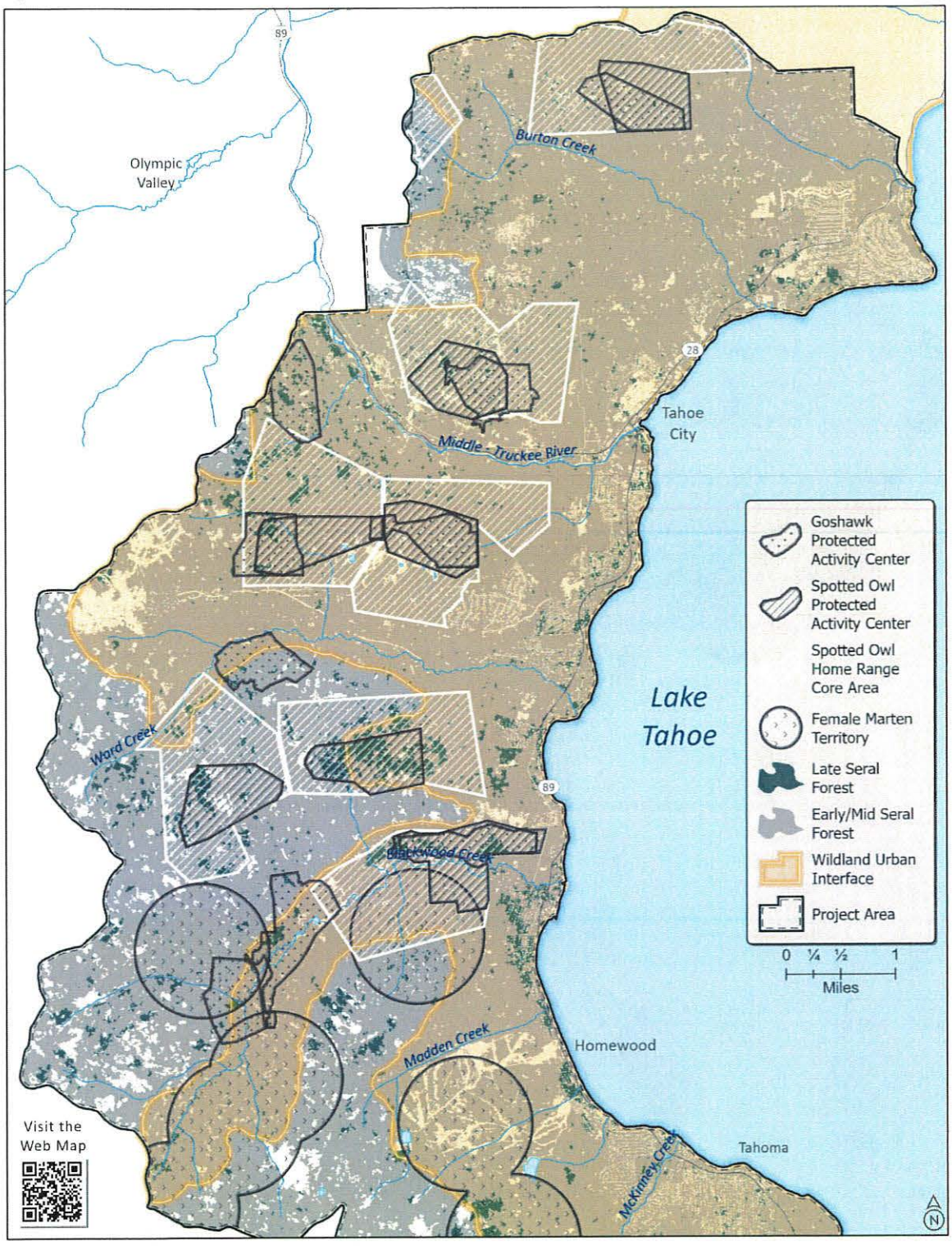
The proposed action would use ground-based mechanical equipment on slopes up to 50 percent where access allows.

Figure 3b – Slopes in Project Area (South)



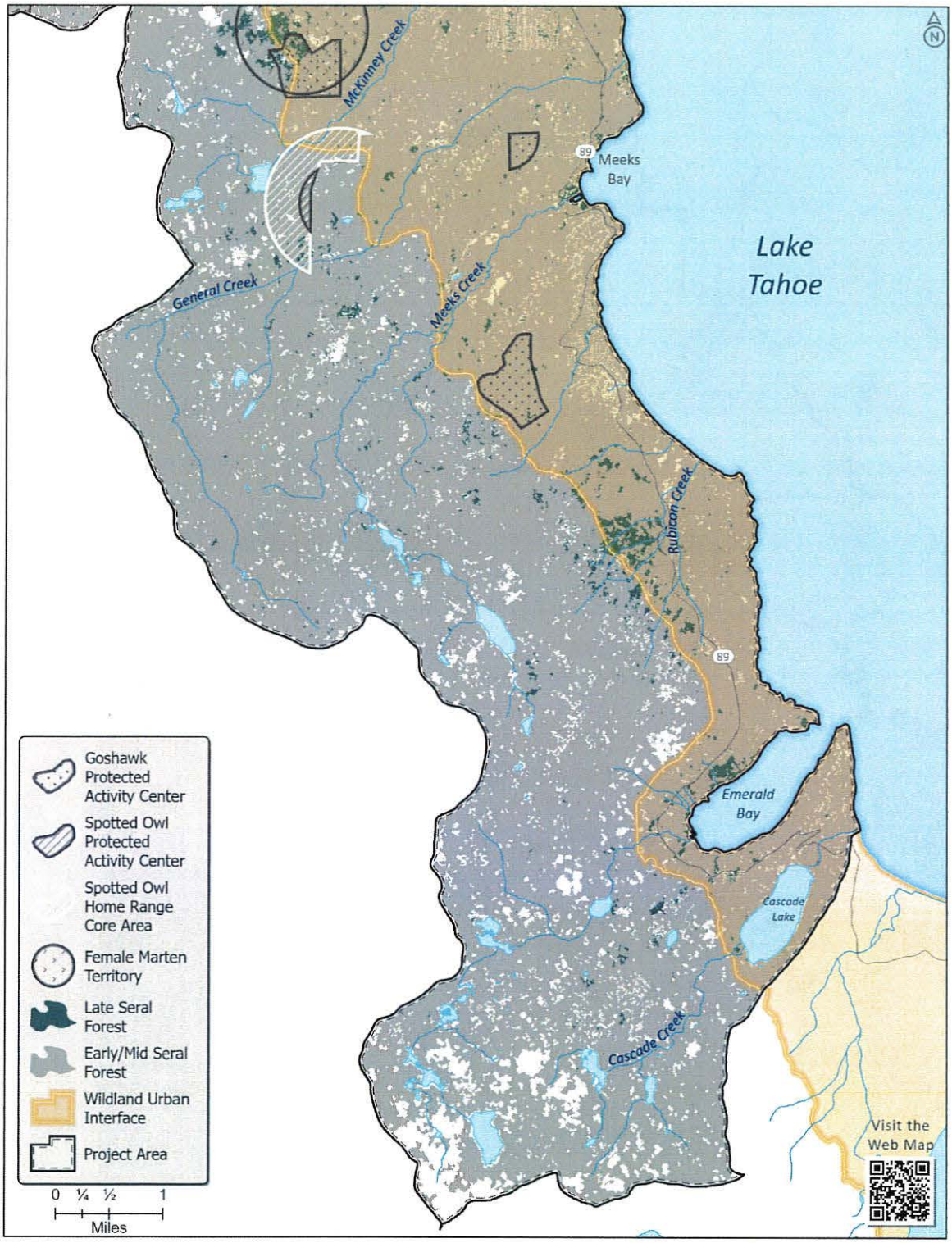
The proposed action would use ground-based mechanical equipment on slopes up to 50 percent where access allows.

Figure 4a – Terrestrial Habitat (North)



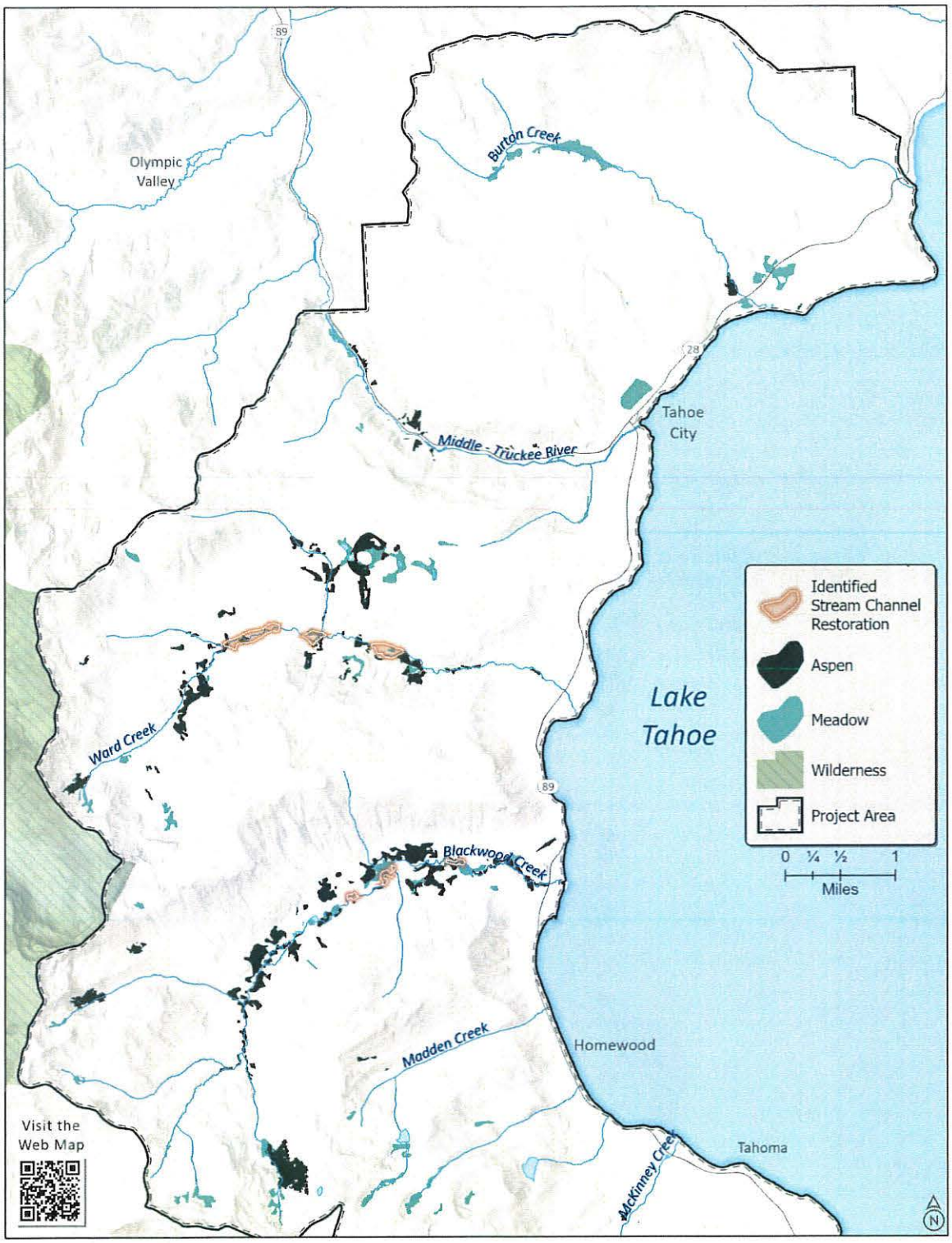
The proposed action would enhance habitat for late-seral associated species such as northern goshawk, California spotted owl, and Pacific marten.

Figure 4b – Terrestrial Habitat (South)



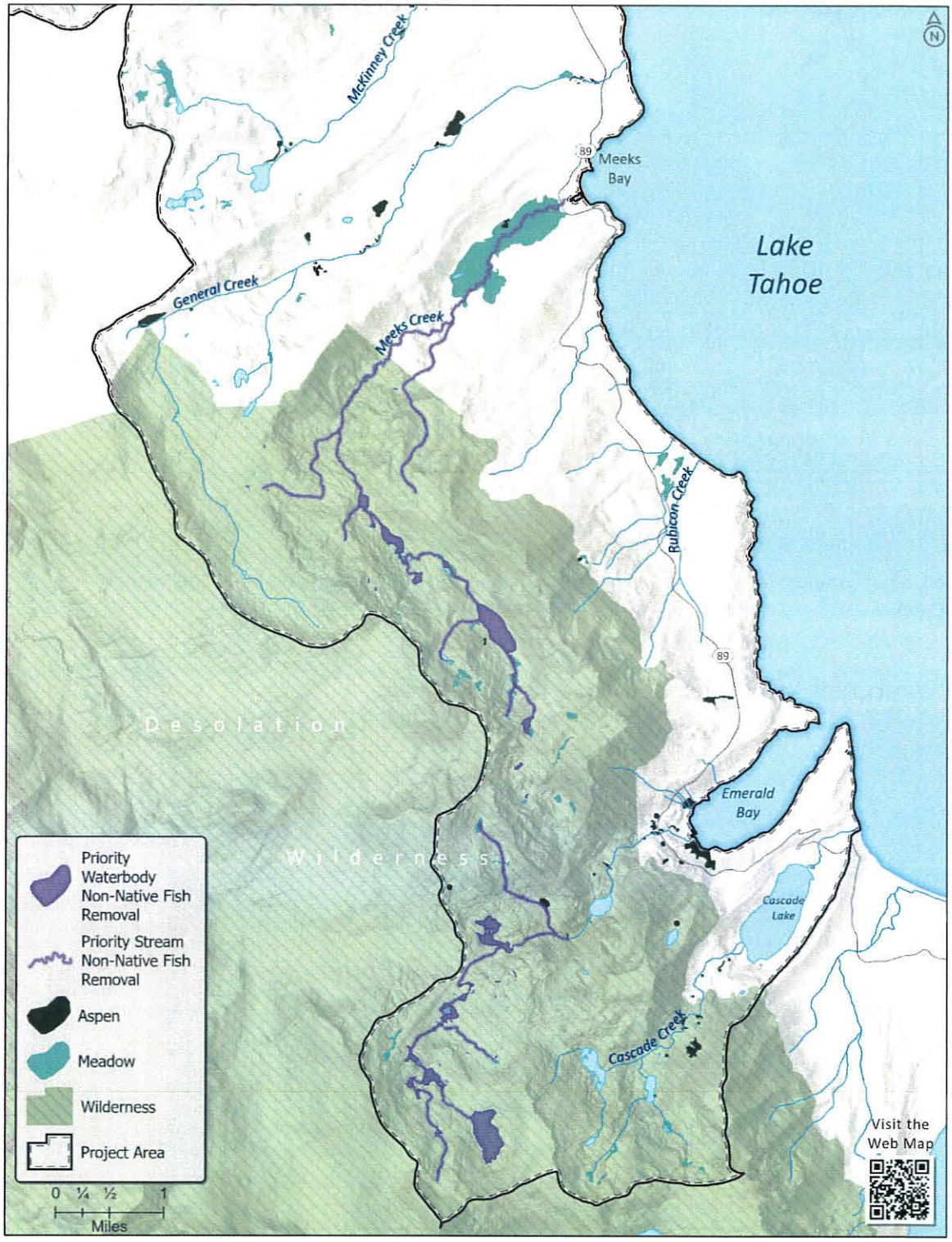
The proposed action would enhance habitat for late-seral associated species such as northern goshawk, California spotted owl, and Pacific marten.

Figure 5a – Aquatic and Riparian Habitats (North)



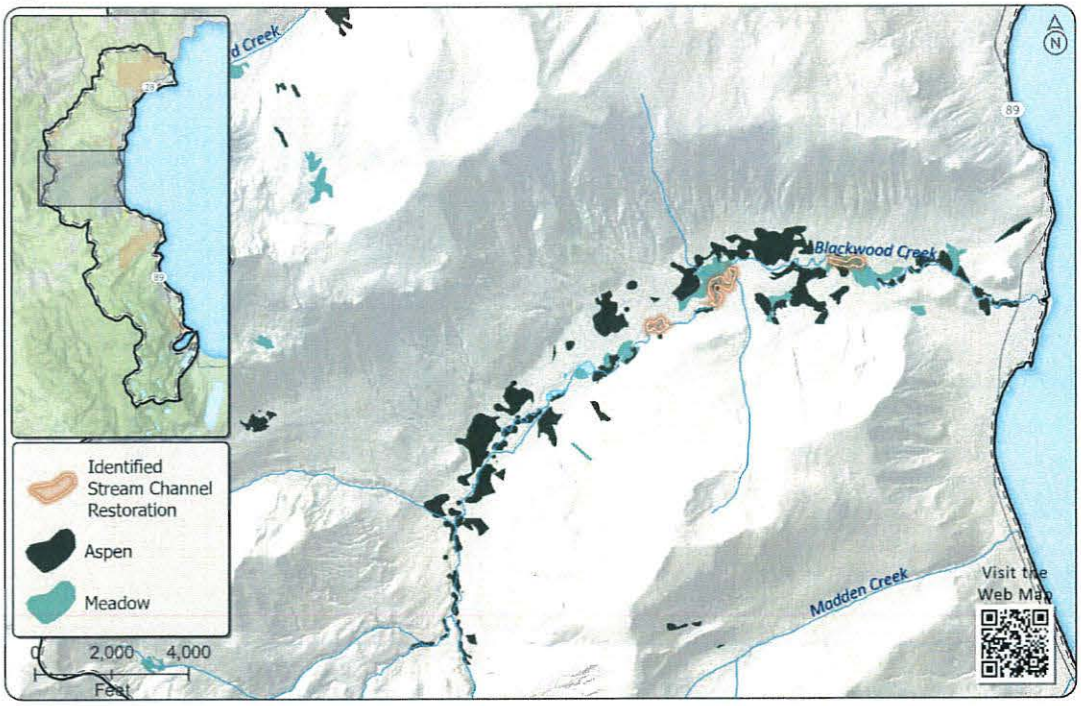
The proposed action includes restoration of meadows and aspen forests as well as streams and floodplains within the Project Area.

Figure 5b – Aquatic and Riparian Habitats (South)



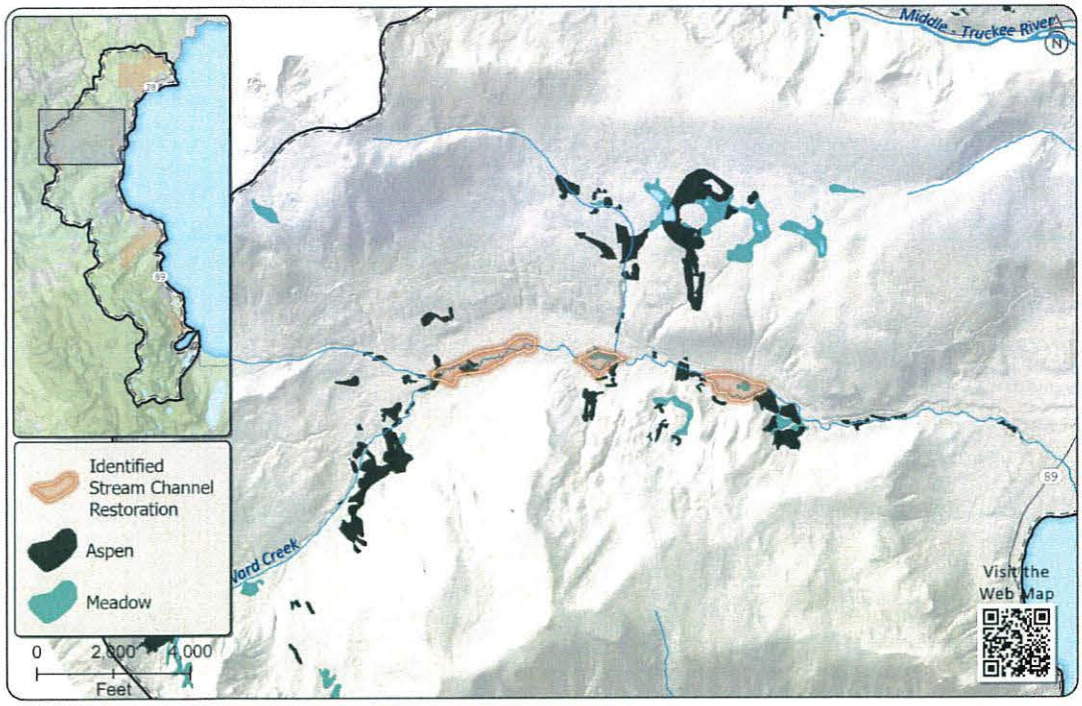
The proposed action includes restoration of meadows and aspen forests as well as streams and floodplains within the Project Area. The proposed action would also restore aquatic habitat in specific streams, lakes, and ponds by removing non-native species.

Figure 6 – Blackwood Creek Restoration



The proposed action would conduct site-specific in-channel treatments on approximately one mile of Blackwood Creek.

Figure 7 – Ward Creek Restoration



The proposed action would conduct site-specific in-channel treatments on approximately 0.5 miles of Ward Creek.