



Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan

Linking El Dorado, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras,
Tuolumne, and Mariposa Counties



This project was funded by Sierra Jobs First and created to support the initiative's mission of creating a community-led, climate-neutral, inclusive future for our industry in the Sierra region. Through our partnership with Sierra Business Council, regional convener and fiscal administrator for California Jobs First in the Sierra region, we provided industry-specific assistance that supported job growth, inclusive workforce development, and economic resilience, while protecting our region's natural lands and vibrant communities.

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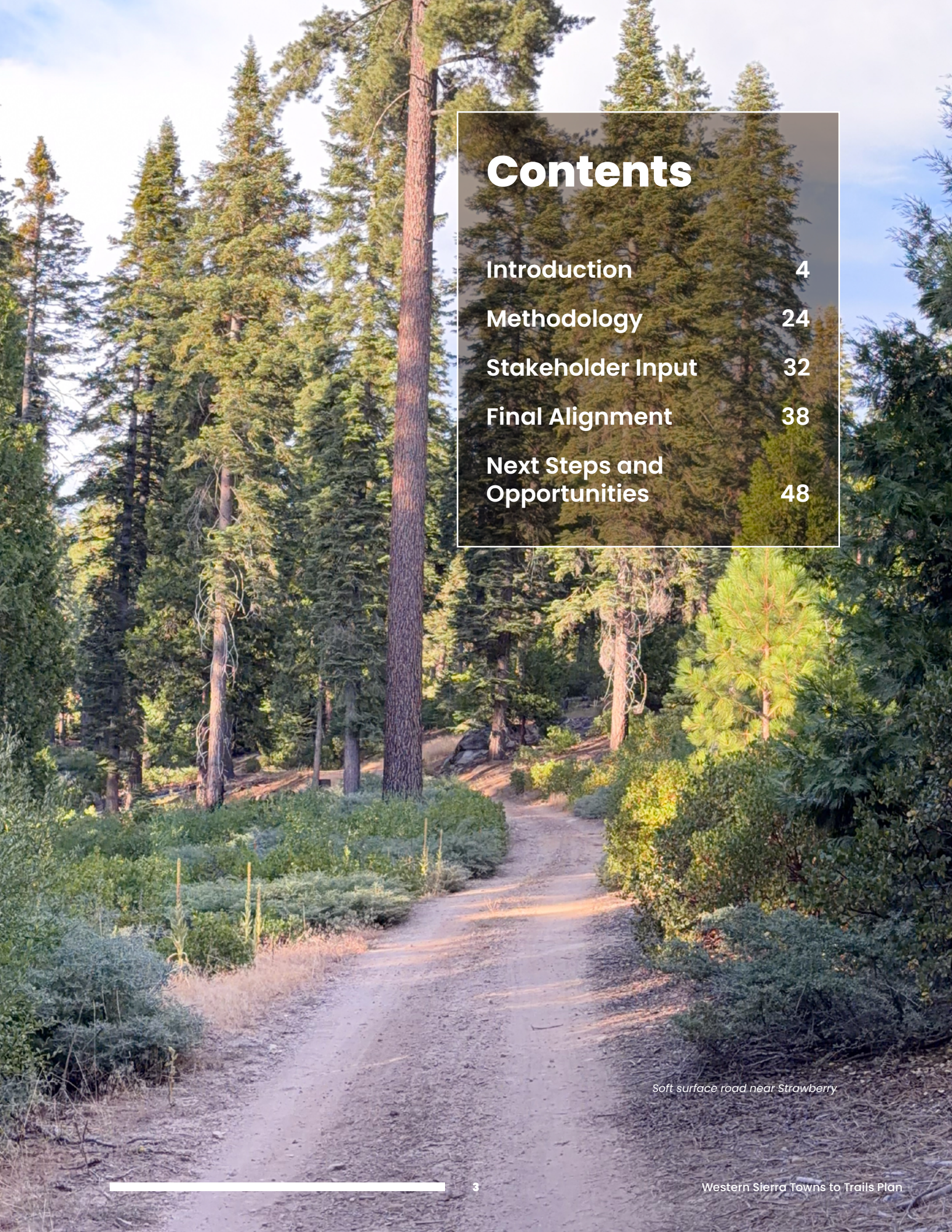
MAMMOTH LAKES TRAILS & PUBLIC ACCESS FOUNDATION (MLTPA)

The Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation (MLTPA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, incorporated in 2007 as a public benefit corporation in the State of California. MLTPA has been engaged in local and regional efforts to advance sustainable outdoor recreation in California's Eastern Sierra since its inception.

In early 2025, MLTPA was awarded a contract with the Sierra Business Council, the regional convener and fiscal agent for Sierra Jobs First, to serve as the project lead and deliver a Westside Towns to Trails Plan that would connect to an Eastside Towns to Trails Plan finalized by the Eastern Sierra Council of Governments in the spring of 2025. For more information, please visit mltpa.org.

ALTA PLANNING + DESIGN (ALTA)

Alta is an international consulting firm with a mission to create active, healthy communities. Alta works to mitigate climate change and advance safety and social justice through sustainable mobility. Alta connects people to places by providing solutions across the disciplines of planning, design, engineering, education and encouragement programs, and community engagement. For more information, visit altago.com. Alta led the data analysis that produced the Optimal Path Analysis for the final proposed alignment and provided graphic and production services for this document.

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a forest of tall evergreen trees. The road is light brown and appears to be a soft surface. The trees are green and have dark trunks. The sky is blue with some white clouds. The overall scene is a natural, wooded area.

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Soft surface road near Strawberry



1

Introduction



Land Acknowledgment

Public lands in the United States hold the creation stories, burial grounds, and ceremonial sites of Indigenous peoples who were killed or forcibly removed during territorial expansion. In the Western Sierra region, tribes including the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians, Chicken Ranch Rancheria Me-Wuk Indians, Washoe, Nisenan, and the Southern Sierra Miwuk continue to care for their ancestral lands while navigating the ongoing impacts of colonization. This acknowledgment is an invitation to all organizations, residents, and visitors to recognize the way this history has shaped the present as all parties work together in anticipation of a better future.

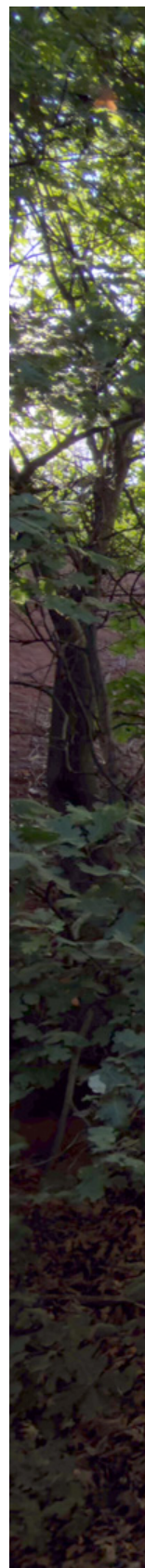
Image: Jesse Pluim, Bureau of Land Management

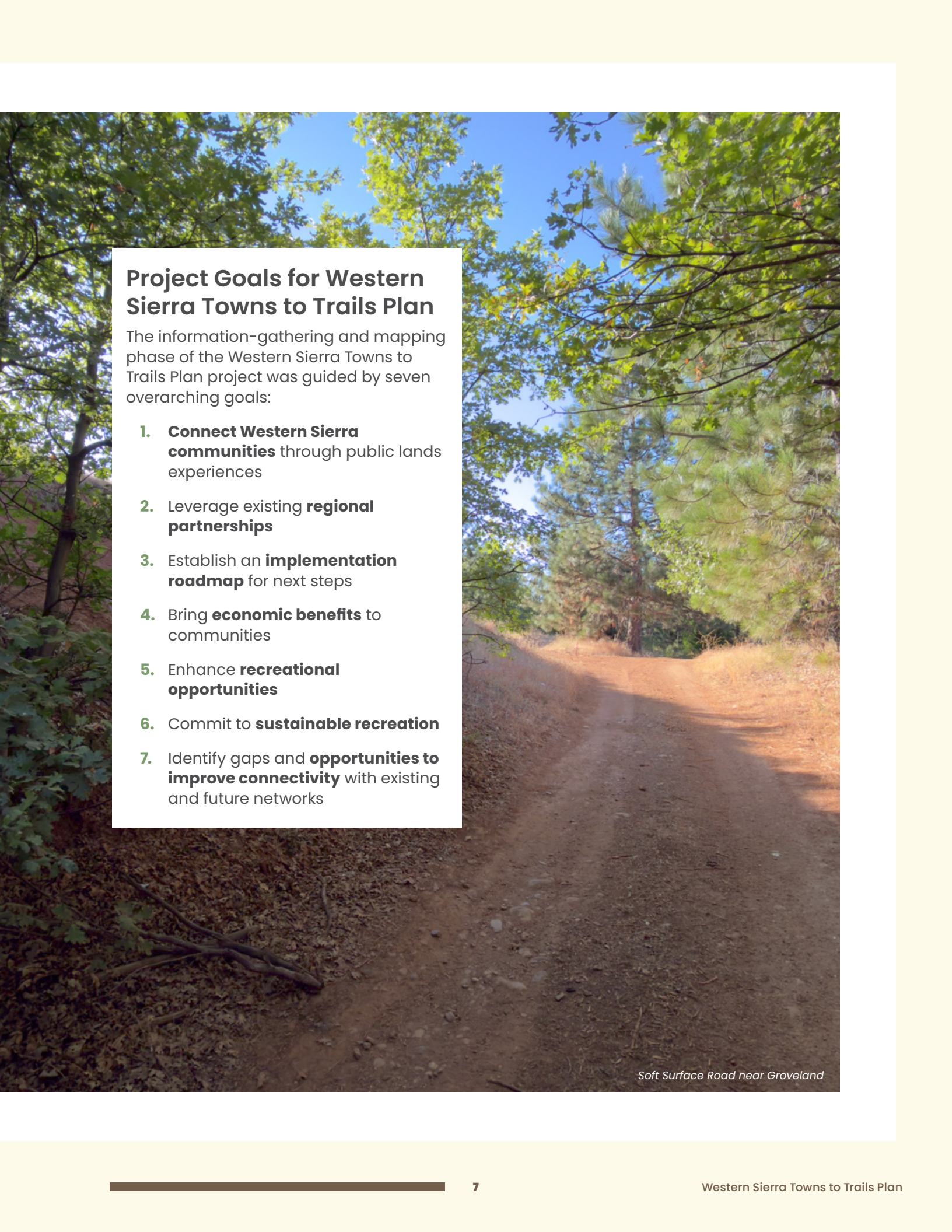
What is Towns to Trails?

The Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan is a recreation route connecting towns and communities to public lands, following about 267 miles of roads and trails from South Lake Tahoe to Mariposa along the Sierra Nevada's western edge. It links El Dorado, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and Mariposa counties, meandering through golden pine forests and lush grasslands. Abundant public lands support superb outdoor recreation opportunities along the way. The route traces the area's Gold Rush-era mining and timber history, connecting visitors and residents to the recreation economies of Western Sierra gateway communities.

The Plan comes from a feasibility study that analyzed existing soft-surface trails and roads to identify potential links, guided by connectivity priorities set by land managers. The team consulted with community members and planners on options, challenges, and alignments. The route uses existing infrastructure and legal modes of travel across multiple jurisdictions, including lands managed by regional tribes, the Eldorado and Stanislaus national forests, the Bureau of Land Management, and California State Parks.

Planning surfaced a number of challenges, questions, and next steps, all of which will need to be evaluated or resolved before implementation can begin. In particular, realizing a fully contiguous alignment will require continued agency and tribal coordination, environmental analysis, ground truthing, and further study.





Project Goals for Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan

The information-gathering and mapping phase of the Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan project was guided by seven overarching goals:

1. **Connect Western Sierra communities** through public lands experiences
2. Leverage existing **regional partnerships**
3. Establish an **implementation roadmap** for next steps
4. Bring **economic benefits** to communities
5. Enhance **recreational opportunities**
6. Commit to **sustainable recreation**
7. Identify gaps and **opportunities to improve connectivity** with existing and future networks

Soft Surface Road near Groveland



Soft Surface Road near Strawberry

Route and Usage

The feasibility study focused on connecting existing, publicly accessible soft-surface trails and roads. Although the project team identified several gaps in the route, the study's goal was to complete the Western Towns to Trails route without creating new trails, roads, or paths. The Plan prioritized the use of existing trails and roads, aiming to link a mix of soft-surface infrastructure currently managed by various agencies into a single, continuous route.

Users can expect a varied experience along the route, as it departs South Lake Tahoe on roads, continues on single-track trails, and transitions to a mix of soft-surface and

occasional paved roads interspersed with single-track sections. Users can take on the full 267 miles, or choose a point-to-point segment between towns, tailoring the trip to their own time, ability, and interest.

Stakeholders identified hiking and biking as the primary focus of this project. The analysis also considered roads and trails accessible to off-highway vehicle (OHV) use; however, this route is not recommended for through OHV travel because it includes sections where OHVs are not allowed, such as county-maintained roads, highways, and single-track trails.

Project Timeline

Below is an outline of the work performed for this study, spanning Spring 2025 through Fall 2026.

■ Spring 2025: Project Kick-off and Existing Conditions

- Collected trail and road alignments from land management agencies, reviewed previous planning documents, established points of contact, and prepared materials for subsequent project phases • Hosted an agency and tribal partner kick-off meeting • Hosted a public kick-off meeting

■ Summer 2025: Collaborative Planning Phase 1

- Met with agency partners • Created draft alignments and solicited feedback in a series of in-person community workshops using large-scale plotted maps, 3D imagery, and town-to-town mapbooks • Workshops focused on identifying backbone trails, essential destinations, key areas of avoidance, and maintaining a continuous alignment

■ Winter 2025: Draft Alignment Refinement

- Reviewed and georeferenced agency and community input • Explored experiential and connectivity improvements

■ Spring 2026: Collaborative Planning Phase 2

- Met with agency partners • Presented refined draft alignments and solicited feedback in a series of in-person community workshops using large-scale plotted maps, 3D imagery, and town-to-town mapbooks • Workshops focused on assessing alternatives, addressing gaps, and maintaining allowable uses

■ Summer 2026: Draft Alignment Refinement

- Reviewed and georeferenced agency and community input • Explored experiential and connectivity improvements

■ Fall 2026: Ground Truthing and Draft Plan

- Rode and hiked the entire draft alignment, verifying through-line integrity, identifying gaps, and exploring alternative alignments through an experiential lens

■ Final Plan

- Finalized the draft alignment, documenting underlying agency jurisdiction, allowable use, and other key attributes for further study • Hosted public wrap-up meeting, providing updates on the draft alignment, key opportunities and highlights near and along the proposed alignment, and recommended next steps

History of Towns to Trails

The Westside Towns to Trails planning initiative emerged following the success of the Eastside Towns to Trails Plan. Together, these two trails provide north-south routes along the Sierra Nevada, connecting communities and visitors to trails and offering alternative transportation links between towns.

The Eastside Towns to Trails Plan traces its origins to 2019, when the Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation (MLTPA) convened and facilitated discussions among government officials and members of the public to re-envision sustainable recreation in the Eastern Sierra through the Sustainable Recreation and Tourism Initiative (SRTI), a planning effort funded by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) and Proposition 68. The public overwhelmingly expressed interest in a trail network that would connect the region's communities to each other for recreation, sustainable transportation, and public access.

To realize the public's vision, MLTPA and the Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG) secured a grant from the SNC in the spring of 2022 to plan the Eastside Towns to Trails route. The route traverses Alpine, Mono, and Inyo counties, offering a frontcountry recreation experience and highlighting the Eastern Sierra's history, public lands, and unique character. MLTPA, ESCOG, and Alta Planning + Design collaborated to conduct extensive GIS analysis, gather community and government input, and scout the route. The Eastside Towns to Trails Plan, conducted as a feasibility study, was finalized in early 2025.

The Western Sierra offers parallel opportunities for connected recreation across its public lands and communities, prompting MLTPA to seek funding for a similar planning effort through California Jobs First and the Sierra Jobs First regional initiative, convened by the Sierra Business Council. The Sierra Business Council recognized that trails are a significant economic driver for local businesses and government entities. They also provide an opportunity to highlight regional historic and environmental narratives, as many routes were established by Indigenous nations or early Californians. The Westside Towns to Trails Plan is expected to generate jobs in construction, maintenance, communications, marketing, hospitality, transportation, and guiding. MLTPA connected with the Alpine Trails Association, Amador Trails Association, and Orogenesis Project, each experienced in trail stewardship and convening communities in the Western Sierra.

When complete, the Eastside and Westside Towns to Trails routes will form a trail system connecting both regions on either side of the High Sierra. Both routes begin in South Lake Tahoe in the north, then branch toward Markleeville to the east and Bear Valley to the west, providing enhanced trail connectivity, recreational experiences, and economic opportunities for the California Jobs First/Sierra Jobs First Region.



Stanislaus National Forest

Goals for Communities

As outlined in MLTPA's successful project application to Sierra Jobs First, the goals of the proposed Westside Towns to Trails Plan are that "Western Sierra communities will have identified ways to connect with one another using a combination of existing trail and soft-surface infrastructure that simultaneously enhances their connectivity to public lands, improves their quality of life and offers enriched, immersive public lands experiences for visitors." In line with these criteria, the Westside Towns to Trails Plan does not propose any new infrastructure. Instead, the plan focuses on an alignment that uses existing soft-surface infrastructure and its current allowable uses, while also identifying gaps in the alignment where supportive infrastructure may be lacking. The plan aims to identify a route that connects a mix of infrastructure currently managed by various agencies into a single, continuous alignment linking the majority of the Western Sierra escarpment. The selected routes support compatible uses for hiking and biking. Although the analysis did not prioritize off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, portions of the identified routes are currently legally accessible for OHV use.

Study Area

Spanning approximately 300 miles along the Sierra Nevada's western slope, this corridor extends from the high-granite basin of South Lake Tahoe to the deeply carved Merced River canyon outside Mariposa. Elevational gradients descend from dense mixed-conifer forests of ponderosa, sugar pine, and giant sequoia groves to foothill oak savannas. Land management is dominated by federal lands, linking the Eldorado, Stanislaus, and Sierra national forests and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, alongside Yosemite National Park. Historic Mother Lode mining camps and timber hubs have evolved into gateway towns for recreation, forestry, and tourism, balancing historic preservation with ongoing watershed management.

El Dorado County

El Dorado County extends from the foothills of the Sacramento Valley across the Sierra Nevada crest to the eastern shores of Lake Tahoe. Topographically, the county rises from low-lying interior oak woodlands and rolling agricultural corridors up through dense mixed-conifer belts dominated by ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and incense cedar, culminating in high-alpine granitic peaks. The landscape is deeply carved by the American and Cosumnes River watersheds.

The county sits at the epicenter of California's Gold Rush, following James Marshall's 1848 discovery at Sutter's Mill in Coloma. Land ownership is split between private holdings in the western foothill communities and public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service, primarily within the Eldorado National Forest and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Image: Victor Lyon, Christmas Valley, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit





Image: Stanislaus National Forest

Alpine County

Alpine County occupies a high-altitude, rugged swath of the central Sierra Nevada along the Nevada border, between Lake Tahoe and Yosemite National Park. Characterized by dramatic vertical relief, steep granitic peaks, and high mountain passes, including Carson and Ebbetts Passes, the county's ecology shifts rapidly from western red fir and lodgepole pine forests to dry eastern Sierra pinyon-juniper woodlands and sagebrush scrub. Key hydrographic features include the headwaters of the East and West Forks of the Carson River and the Mokelumne River watershed. Over 90% of the county is federally managed within the Humboldt-Toiyabe, Eldorado, and Stanislaus national forests. The Carson-Iceberg and Mokelumne wilderness areas preserve extensive undeveloped, roadless tracts. Originally inhabited by the Washoe people, the county saw 19th-century European settlement driven by the discovery of silver, triggering a short-lived mining boom around Silver Mountain City. With no incorporated cities and a population under 1,500, Alpine is California's least populous county.



Image: Courtesy of Calaveras Visitors Bureau

Calaveras County

Calaveras County lies in the central Sierra Nevada foothills, bounded to the north by the Mokelumne River and to the south by the Stanislaus River. Elevational gradients range from rolling oak savannas and chaparral brushlands in the west to dense mixed-conifer forests of sugar pine, white fir, and incense cedar at higher elevations. A notable ecological feature is the presence of ancient *Sequoiadendron giganteum* groves preserved in Calaveras Big Trees State Park.

The county's land is a checkerboard of private acreage, state parks, and federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Stanislaus National Forest. Water management plays a major regional role, with reservoirs such as New Hogan and New Melones regulating flow, generating hydroelectric power, and storing municipal water.

Historically, the county gained prominence during the 1849 Gold Rush as a prime location for placer surface mining and rich hydraulic and lode extraction, immortalized in Mark Twain's tales of early camp life. Today, Calaveras County centers on viticulture, cattle ranching, forest products, rural residential development, and recreation around its lakes, caves, and alpine corridors.



Image: Downtown Groveland, courtesy of Visit Tuolumne County/Menka Belgal

Tuolumne County

Tuolumne County extends from the low-lying margin of the San Joaquin Valley to the high Sierra Nevada crest, encompassing a diverse landscape of river canyons, volcanic tablelands, and high-elevation granitic plateaus, shaped by the Tuolumne and Stanislaus River basins. The county's biodiversity transitions from blue oak woodlands at lower elevations to mixed-conifer zones and subalpine species near the Sierra crest. More than 70% of the county's land is publicly managed, primarily by the Stanislaus National Forest. The county's southern portion contains northern Yosemite National Park and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, a critical water and power source for the San Francisco Bay Area. Indigenous Me-Wuk territories predated 19th-century settlement, which exploded after the discovery of gold along the Mother Lode belt.

Mariposa

Mariposa County anchors the southern terminus of the Mother Lode region along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, spanning from the gentle foothills near the Merced County border to the glaciated peaks of the High Sierra, with the deeply carved Merced and Chowchilla River canyons dominating the landscape. Ecosystems range from foothill chaparral and interior live oak communities to expansive mid-elevation ponderosa pine forests and alpine tundra.

Yosemite National Park covers more than half of the county's land area, including the iconic Yosemite Valley. Much of the remaining high country is protected within the Sierra National Forest and Bureau of Land Management parcels. Private land is concentrated primarily in foothill valleys and along major transit corridors.

Organized in 1850 as one of California's original 27 counties, Mariposa was vast, earning the moniker "Mother of Counties." Modern Mariposa County focuses on natural resource preservation, gateway hospitality services for Yosemite, rural residential properties, and watershed protection.

Image: Downtown Mariposa, courtesy of Yosemite Mariposa County Tourism Bureau



Existing Conditions

Land Ownership

Land ownership across the South Lake Tahoe to Mariposa corridor is overwhelmingly under federal jurisdiction, creating a continuous mosaic of public land along the Sierra Nevada crest and upper slopes. The U.S. Forest Service administers most of this acreage through the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, Eldorado National Forest, Stanislaus National Forest, and Sierra National Forest, along with extensive wilderness areas such as Desolation, Mokelumne, and Emigrant. The Bureau of Land Management manages scattered parcels in low- to mid-elevation zones, focusing on river corridors and habitat conservation. The National Park Service holds a major anchor in the south with Yosemite National Park. State management includes California State Parks—preserving iconic cultural and natural sites such as Calaveras Big Trees and Marshall Gold Discovery—and ecological reserves managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Private acreage, comprising timberlands owned by industrial operators, agricultural ranches, and foothill communities, remains concentrated primarily along lower-elevation western slopes and historical transport corridors.

El Capitan and Half Dome in Yosemite National Park View from Near El Portal



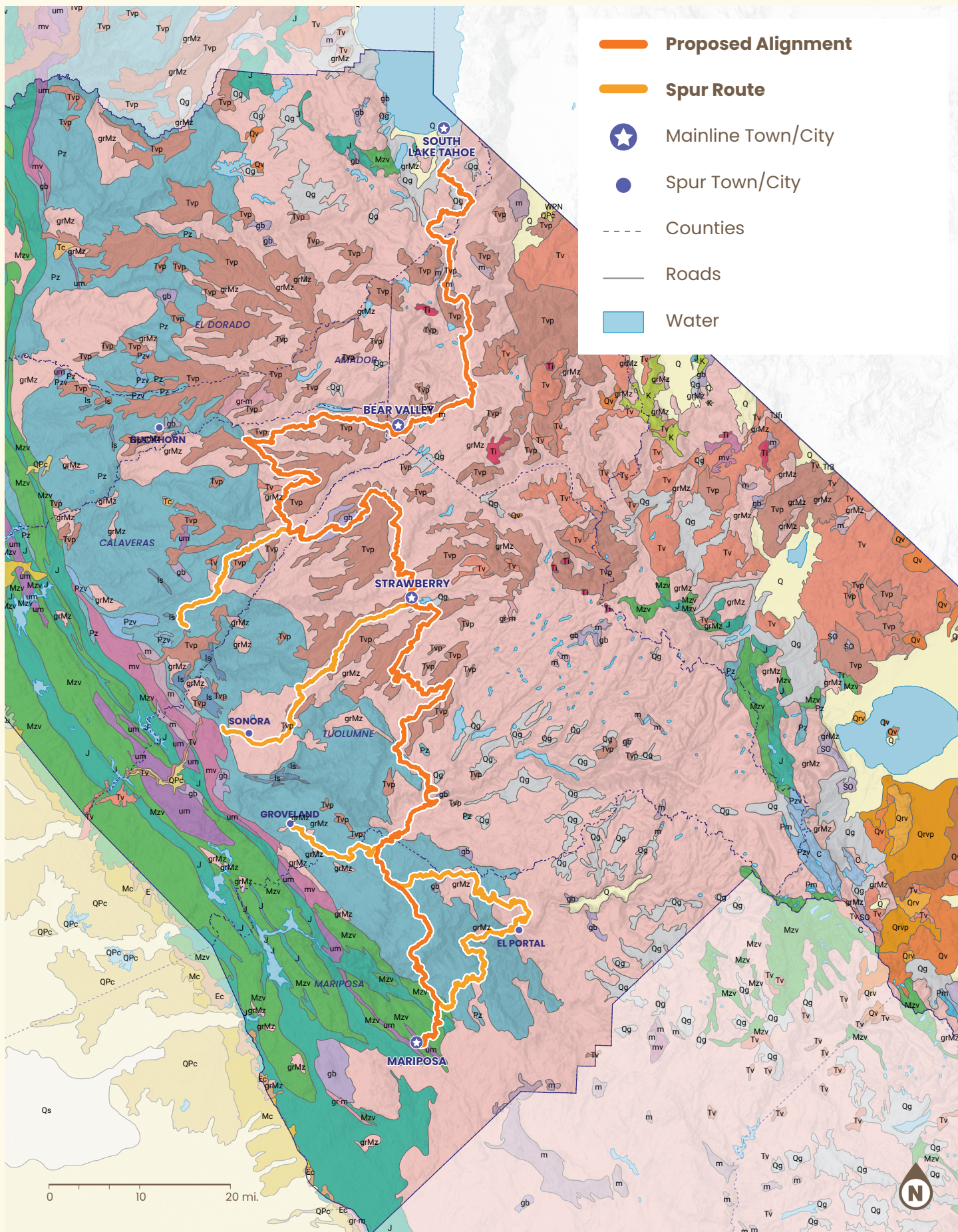




Paved Road in Alpine County

Geology

The geology of the western Sierra slope from South Lake Tahoe to Mariposa is defined by Mesozoic granitic plutons that form the core of the Sierra Nevada Batholith and were uplifted during the late Cenozoic. Pre-batholithic metamorphic rocks, known as the Western Sierra Nevada Metamorphic Belt, underlie lower elevations and host the lucrative quartz-vein gold deposits of the Mother Lode district. Tertiary volcanic flows and mudflows—most notably the Mehrten Formation—capped large portions of the central Sierra, carving dramatic inverted topography along modern ridge lines. Quaternary glaciations repeatedly sculpted the high-elevation landscape, leaving glaciated granitic domes, steep cirques, U-shaped river valleys such as Yosemite Valley, and extensive moraine complexes that frame alpine lakes. High vertical relief across major west-flowing drainage basins, including the American, Mokelumne, Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and Merced Rivers, continues to drive active mass wasting, fluvial erosion, and sediment transport into the Central Valley, leaving a structurally complex matrix of granitic, metamorphic, and volcanic formations.

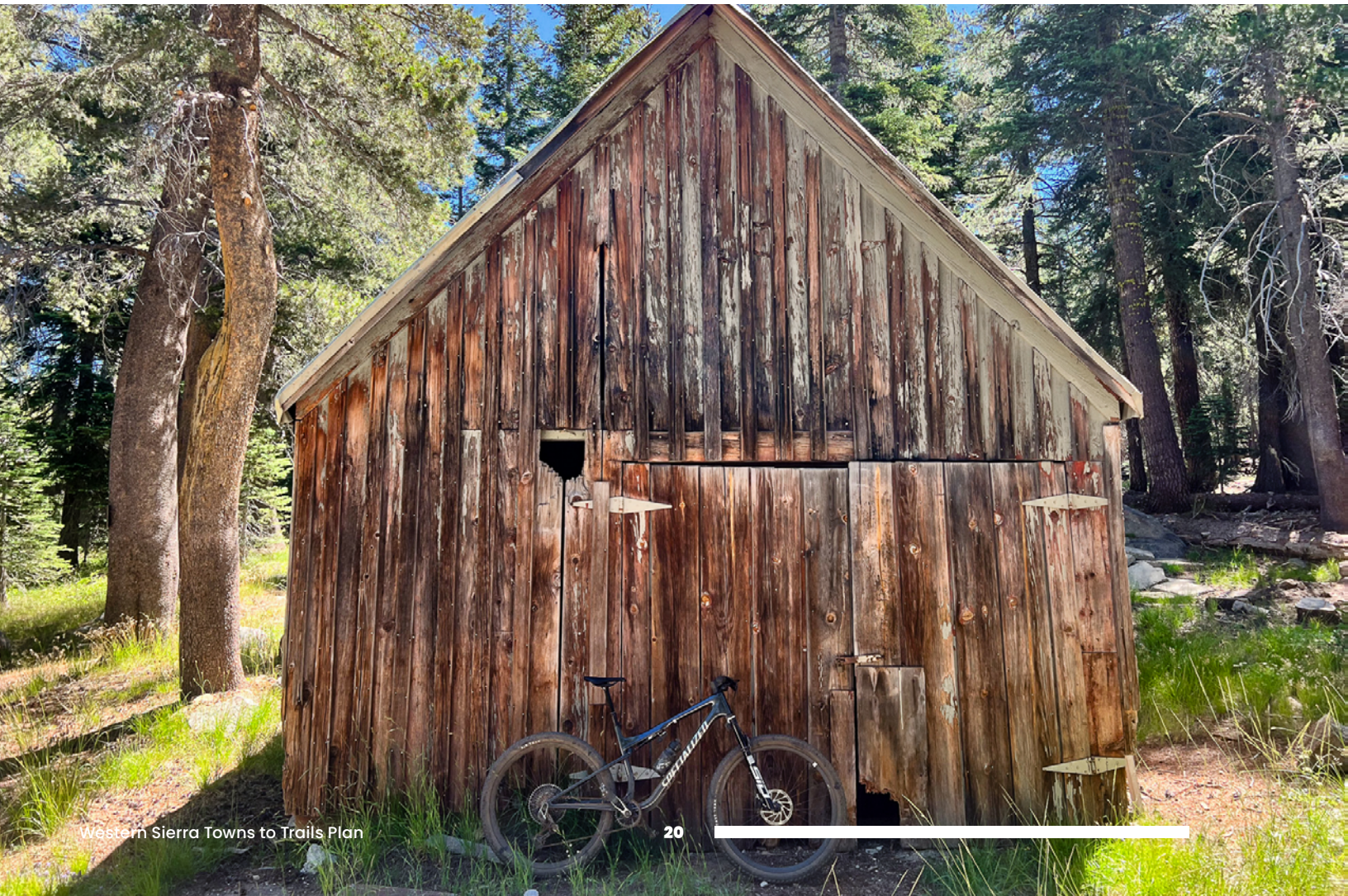


Cultural Resources and Points of Interest

Human history along this trans-Sierra corridor spans thousands of years, marked by seasonal camps, village sites, and grinding rocks used by the Washoe, Northern Miwok, and Southern Sierra Miwok peoples. Washoe communities gathered along the shores and in the high meadows of the Tahoe basin. Sierra Miwok villages across the Amador, Calaveras, and Tuolumne foothills relied on processed acorns at grinding rock sites (*chaw'se*), where mortar holes and petroglyphs remain visible today. Farther south, Southern Sierra Miwok villages in Yosemite Valley relied on black oak acorns, a tradition tribal members continue through stewardship and oak restoration. Both the Washoe and Miwok are known for fine basketry, including the coiled willow work of Washoe weaver Louisa Keyser.

The mid-19th century transformed the region through the California Gold Rush, creating the historic State Route 49 corridor, lined with mining towns such as Placerville, Angels Camp, Columbia, Sonora, and Mariposa. Key cultural landmarks include Columbia State Historic Park, the Marshall Gold Discovery Site, and the historic Mariposa County Courthouse. Massive 19th- and 20th-century water and timber infrastructure, including historic flumes, emigrant wagon trails, and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, reflects the transformation of raw natural resources into regional power networks. Today, major public points of interest draw global visitation, anchored by Yosemite National Park, Calaveras Big Trees State Park, the Carson Pass scenic corridor, and an extensive network of historic mountain passes linking foothill communities to the alpine backcountry.

Cabin on Blue Lakes Road near South Lake Tahoe







Single Track Trail near Pinecrest



Sign at crossing of the Tuolumne River



Along Forest Service Road 3NO1

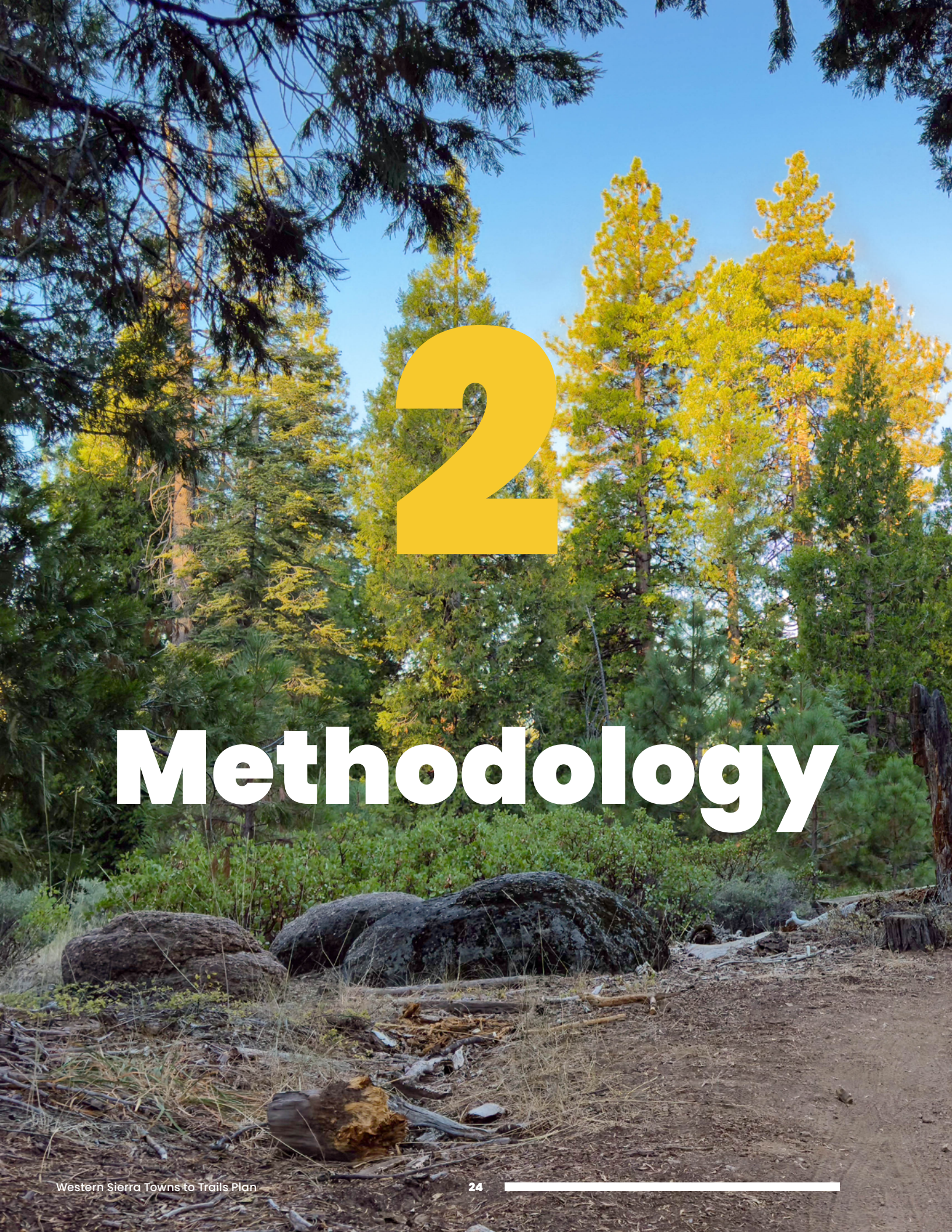




Soft Surface Road near El Portal



Soft Surface Road south of SR 120

A photograph of a forest scene with tall evergreen trees, some with yellowing needles, and a large yellow number '2' overlaid in the center.

2

Methodology



Single Track Trail near Strawberry

Optimal Path Analysis

The goal of the optimal path analysis was to identify potential north-south "main-line" routes that would connect communities throughout the region. Additional spurs and loops were also identified to connect to communities to the east and west of the primary route. To generate potential routes (which could then be vetted or modified through stakeholder engagement), we used an "optimal path" analysis to generate a route based on a number of variables in the landscape:



Roads/Trails

All roads and trails in the study area were categorized into three buckets, and each were given a weight based on the quality of trail experience they would provide

- soft-surface trails – these are ideal for the trail experience we're looking to create
- unpaved roads – low-traffic backcountry roads have the potential to be great parts of the route, and they utilize existing infrastructure
- paved roads – these are the least ideal, but could be used in a pinch if no other viable route exists



Recreation Facilities & Landmarks

These are the features that we want the trail to bring people to: campgrounds, cultural sites, and day-use areas. We designed our analysis to favor routes that bring people close to these features.



Fire Footprints

Fires impact infrastructure, landscapes, and built amenities along the trail route. We designed our analysis to consider recent wildfires. Areas with most recent fires were given least preference, areas with fires that occurred between 5-15 years ago were assigned a medium preference, and areas that have not been affected by fire in the last 20 years were given most preference.



Wilderness Areas

Federal wilderness areas are areas where mechanized equipment like bicycles are not allowed. For this reason, we made sure our model avoided official wilderness areas.

We assigned “costs” to the different travel surface types, proximity to recreation facilities, time since a wildfire, and wilderness area boundaries in the study area. Then our geographic analysis tool looked for the least “costly” paths, the ones that made it “cheapest” to access the surfaces, places, and environments we wanted the route to go.

Costs are assigned to each feature, before combining into a single cost surface raster:

Roads/Trails

- Tier 1 = 1
- Tier 2 = 10
- Tier 3 = 100
- Tier 4 = 1000
- All other cells = 9999

Recreation Facilities & Landmarks

- Area within 2.5 miles of a feature = 1
- Areas further than 2.5 miles = 10

Fire Footprints

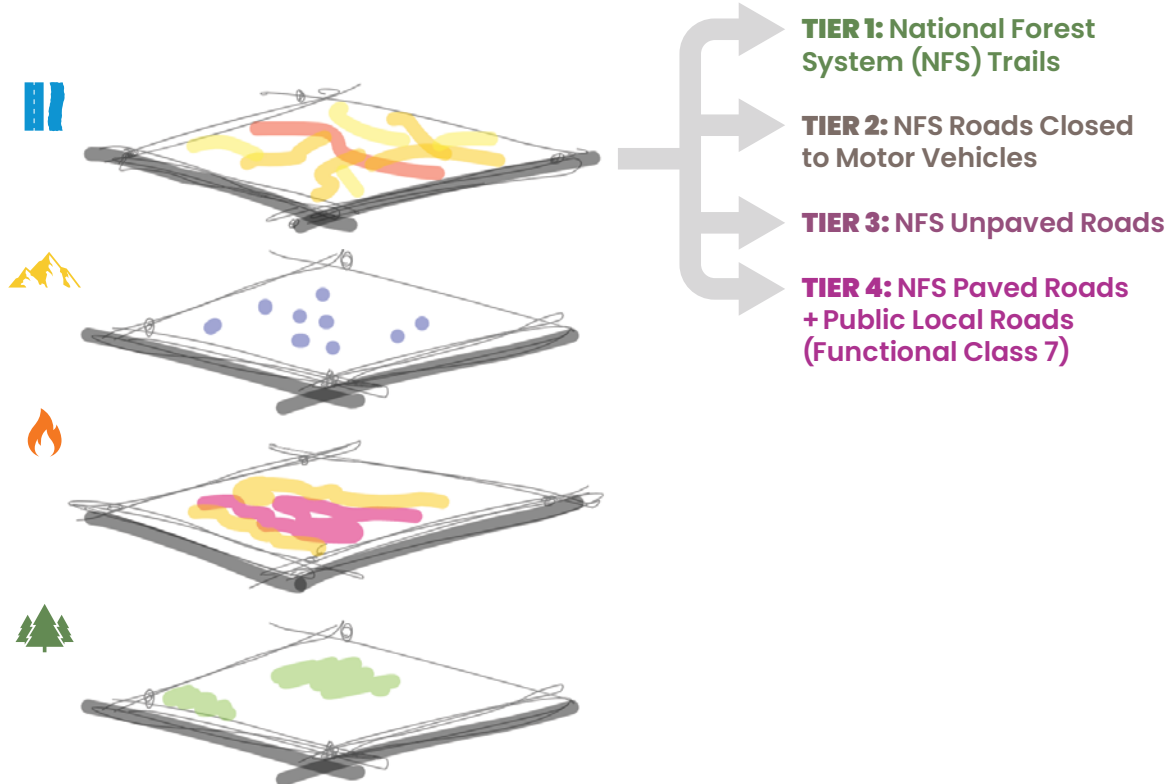
- Fires in the past 5 years = 20
- 5-10 years = 10
- 10-15 years = 5
- 15+ years = 1

Wilderness Areas

- Boundaries were used as an absolute barrier for optimal path

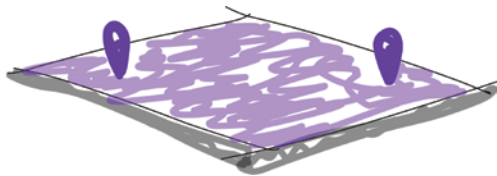
After raster inputs are combined and weighted, GIS processes a least cost path between a start point and end point.

RASTER INPUTS



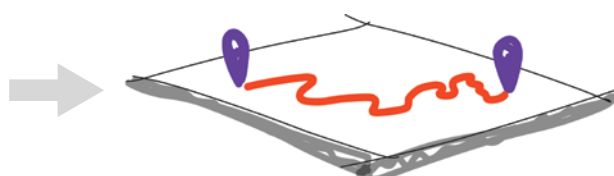
Raster inputs are combined and weighted

COST SURFACE



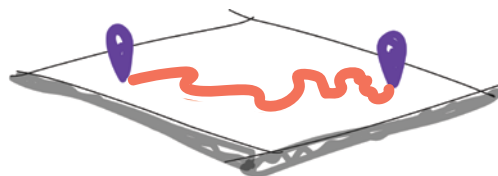
GIS processes a least cost path between a start point and end point

LEAST COST PATH



Path is ground truthed and reviewed by the public

PROPOSED ALIGNMENT



Route Identification and Verification

Data Aggregation and Alignment Analysis

The project team evaluated potential trail corridors along the western Sierra slope by synthesizing multi-jurisdictional spatial data, assessing environmental constraints, and incorporating agency and public feedback. The team collected and evaluated published maps and geospatial datasets from key land management entities, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, California State Parks, and local county jurisdictions. The team then standardized attributes, including road classifications, permitted recreation uses, and agency boundaries, into a single unified geodatabase. This centralized framework enabled the team, agency partners, and the public to evaluate up- and downstream connectivity, test segment configurations, and maintain consistency across administrative borders during public alignment workshops.

Alongside alignment evaluation, the team compiled existing spatial layers to identify environmental constraints and opportunities, then mapped key sensitive areas to avoid potential user conflicts and resource degradation, including U.S. Forest Service Wilderness Areas, California Department of Fish and Wildlife Ecological Reserves, State Parks, seasonal wildlife protection zones, and critical habitats. Physical landscape attributes, such as slope and elevation, were overlaid to assess trail construction feasibility and user experience.

Additionally, the team collaborated with agency partners and local stakeholders to map key destinations—including gateway communities, campgrounds, historic sites, and scenic vistas—ensuring the proposed north-south spine meaningfully connects local population centers and recreation nodes. Using the compiled inventory, a trail network gap analysis identified non-contiguous trail segments across the multi-county landscape. By classifying alignment segments into contiguous units that support long-distance travel, the analysis highlighted physical barriers such as steep river canyons and checkerboard private land, underscoring the need for ongoing collaboration with agency, tribal, and public partners before formal implementation begins.

Ground Truthing and Field Assessment

To validate GIS modeling and assess on-the-ground feasibility, the project team conducted extensive ground truthing along the entire proposed corridor. Ground truthing served a dual purpose: directly engaging gateway communities and local stakeholders and physically field-checking draft alignments by bicycle and on foot.

The team visited rural communities throughout the study area to meet with local land managers, municipal leaders, trail advocates, and residents. These in-person consultations provided essential context on local access preferences,

historic land-use constraints, seasonal closures, and community connectivity goals that could not be derived from spatial datasets alone. Stakeholder feedback directly informed alignment adjustments, highlighting priority connections to town centers and identifying sensitive private parcels and high-conflict corridors to avoid.

Simultaneously, team members traversed the draft alignments by non-motorized transport to assess real-world conditions. Traveling on foot and by bicycle enabled a rigorous evaluation of tread stability, surface texture, grade steepness, brush encroachment, and existing erosion. Field verification revealed critical discrepancies in published data, including decommissioned roads, impassable washouts, unmapped gates, and steep topography that compromised safety or the user experience.

This physical reconnaissance also enabled the team to test overall route continuity, verify the feasibility of identified gap-closure segments, and assess the practical experience of long-distance thru-travel. Ground truthing, which bridges remote mapping and field-tested realities, ensured that the final conceptual alignment is not only geographically continuous on paper but also physically viable, ecologically sound, and supported by local communities.

Single Track Trail near crossing of SR 108



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue fedora-style hat with a gold band, sunglasses, a plaid shirt, and blue jeans, is crouching in a grassy field. She is smiling and looking down. The background is a sunlit forest with tall grass and trees.

3

Stakeholder Input



Image: Jesse Pluim, Bureau of Land Management

Engagement Overview

The Plan’s outreach and engagement activities were essential to this effort to identify an alignment that incorporated local knowledge as a baseline for appropriate segments and destinations. These activities included soliciting feedback from stakeholders, land management agencies, tribes, and the public throughout the project to ensure that project recommendations reflected community needs and desires and were consistent with land management plans and policies. This effort leveraged various resources and strategies to meaningfully engage a wide range of community members and agencies. The project team maintained a flexible approach, providing multiple paths for input across the project geography, and implemented intuitive, engaging, and low-friction opportunities for community members and stakeholders to help shape the draft alignment. The team offered multiple avenues for feedback and maintained open dialogue with agency partners and community members. The planning process featured proactive and intentional community engagement, highlighted by two rounds of in-person community workshops in each county, featuring large-scale plotted maps, 3D imagery, and town-to-town mapbooks. These workshops were exploratory and collaborative, with attendees and the project team marking up maps, discussing the trade-offs of potential alignments, and highlighting areas for further study by the project team.

Engagement Schedule

The stakeholder engagement process followed a structured, multi-phase timeline to refine the proposed alignment:





Image: Public Meeting in Sonora

Sonora Workshop

Tuolumne & Calaveras Focus

The Sonora meeting brought together planning staff from Tuolumne and Calaveras counties, municipal representatives, regional trail advocates, local business leaders, and engaged residents. Discussions focused on capturing economic benefits for historic downtown cores while addressing bottlenecks in high-elevation terrain. Stakeholders emphasized creating direct spur connections to downtown Sonora, Columbia State Historic Park, and Murphys to support regional tourism and small-business spending. Local land managers and environmental advocates highlighted sensitive habitats to avoid, including low-elevation limestone karst systems, public water supply reservoirs, and critical winter deer ranges. Drawing on local trail knowledge, the project team adjusted the draft alignment to use historic railroad grades and existing multi-use corridors in the Stanislaus River watershed. This change minimized new ground disturbance, avoided conflicting land uses, and improved overall trail gradient feasibility for non-motorized users.



Image: Public Meeting in Mariposa

Mariposa Workshop

Mariposa County Focus

Held at the Mariposa County Government Center, this session brought together county community development personnel, regional economic development groups, tribal representatives, Southern Sierra Miwuk community members, and gateway business owners. Input focused on positioning the route draft as a sustainable recreation alternative for visitors traveling to Yosemite National Park. Participants emphasized routing the trail near main-street commercial districts to maximize visitor spending and to establish non-motorized commuter options for local workers. Tribal representatives and local land stewards identified culturally sensitive sites and fragile oak-woodland habitats along the Merced River canyon that required protective buffer zones. In response to local knowledge of severe summer heat and steep canyon topography, the team realigned the corridor to favor shaded north-facing slopes, use established U.S. Forest Service roadbeds, and incorporate water-access nodes, significantly enhancing safety and long-term route sustainability.



Image: Public Meeting in Sutter Creek

Jackson Workshop

Amador County Focus

The Amador County workshop in Jackson brought together county recreation planners, city staff, local conservation NGOs, ranching community representatives, and resident recreationists. Discussions focused on balancing trail access with private agricultural lands and managing high-density recreation near historic mining sites. Stakeholders expressed strong interest in connecting the route to historic downtown centers, including Sutter Creek and Jackson, while agricultural landowners raised concerns about boundary enforcement and emergency vehicle access. Local naturalists identified sensitive botanical zones and seasonal raptor nesting areas along the Cosumnes and Mokelumne River watersheds. Armed with these insights, the project team refined the alignment draft to run primarily along existing public agency right-of-ways, utility corridors, and established timber roads. This adjustment bypassed active cattle operations and delicate ecological areas, preserved continuous north-south connectivity, and provided clear trailhead infrastructure near primary county access roads.



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Final Alignment



Looking west from SR 108

Final Alignment

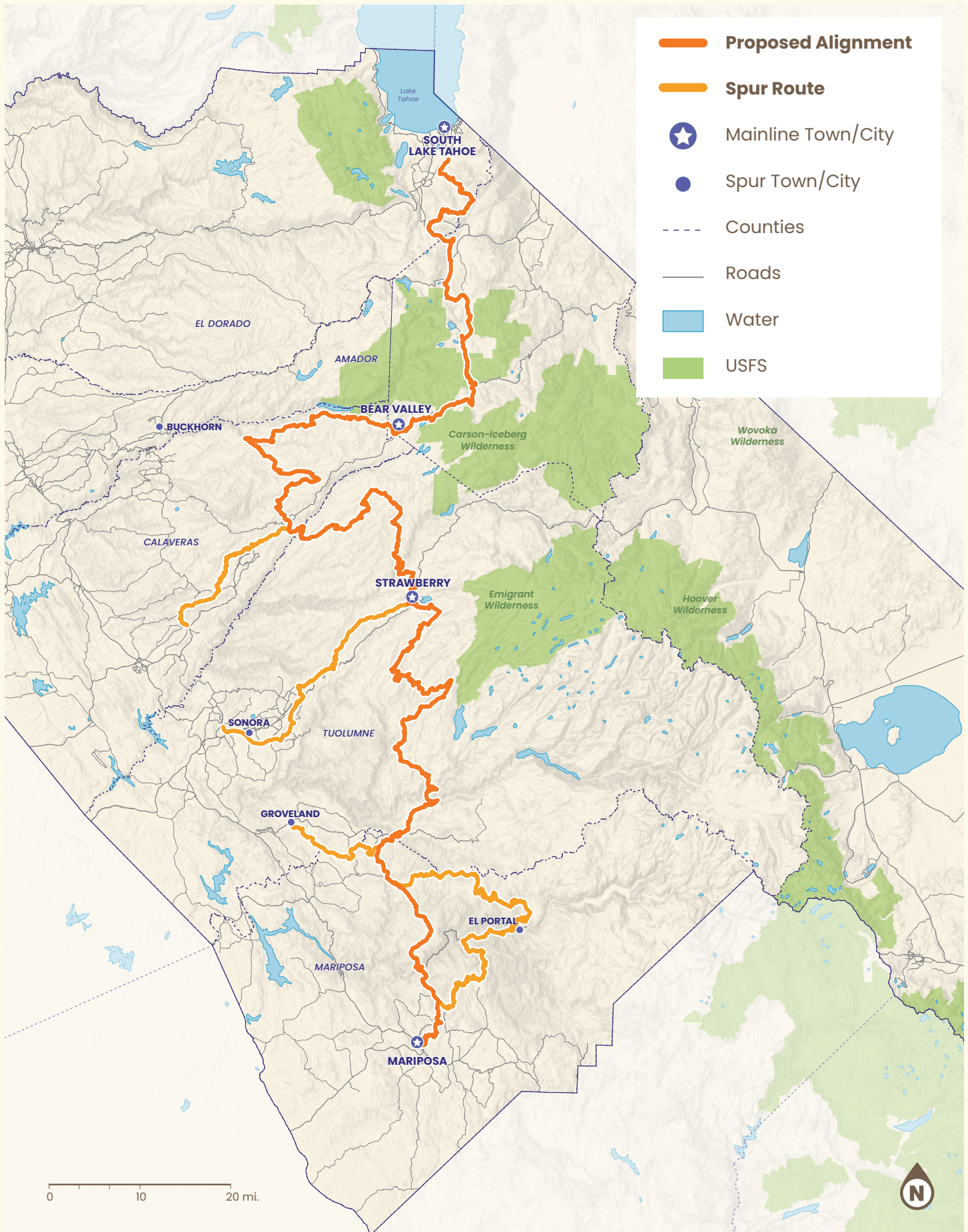
Regional Overview

The identified alignment of the Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan, spanning more than 300 miles and featuring thousands of feet of elevation change, provides access to outdoor recreation and experiences unique to the Western Sierra landscape by using existing infrastructure and its designated uses. People who wish to enjoy the route will need to consult the relevant land management agencies regarding allowable uses for any segment of the proposed alignment. Traveling from north to south, from South Lake Tahoe to Mariposa, the route begins along high-alpine singletrack and forest roads, traversing scenic mountain passes before descending the western slope into El Dorado County. Traversing historic timber and mining corridors, the route's integration with mountain communities provides convenient opportunities to support local jobs and businesses through restaurants, lodging, entertainment, and events. Passing through Amador and Calaveras Counties, the alignment connects historic Gold Rush communities

such as Jackson and Angels Camp while running adjacent to iconic natural features, including ancient giant sequoia groves in Calaveras Big Trees State Park. Crossing the rugged river canyons of the Mokelumne and Stanislaus watersheds, the corridor enters Tuolumne County, guiding users along historic rail grades into Sonora and past gateway access points to northern Yosemite National Park. Continuing south through the Merced River canyon into Mariposa County, the route weaves through oak woodlands and foothill terrain, offering firsthand connections to historic water infrastructure, working landscapes, and rich cultural heritage. The final alignment concludes in the historic town of Mariposa, presenting a continuous west-slope corridor that links mountain towns, national forests, and state parks. The final alignment produced by the Western Sierra Towns to Trails Plan identifies opportunities for continuous non-motorized through-travel across the region, providing visitors and residents with ways to enhance their understanding, appreciation, and investment in the Western Sierra through sustainable outdoor recreation.

Image: Samantha Storms, Bureau of Land Management





South Lake Tahoe to Bear Valley

Beginning in the high-elevation basin of South Lake Tahoe, this northernmost segment traverses rugged alpine terrain along a continuous network of backcountry singletrack and unpaved native-surface forest roads. The route climbs through granitic basins and subalpine fir forests, crossing the Sierra crest near Carson Pass before descending into the upper Mokelumne River watershed. Bypassing paved highway corridors entirely, the alignment uses historic U.S. Forest Service soft-surface doubletrack and ridgeline singletrack through the Eldorado and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests. Users experience sweeping glaciated vistas, alpine lakes, and dramatic volcanic formations along the Carson-Iceberg wilderness boundary. Navigating technical granite-slab bench cuts, forested ridgelines, and dirt timber roads, the route preserves a remote mountain feel before descending to the high-country recreation outpost of Bear Valley, providing a seamless backcountry connector between the Lake Tahoe Basin and the central Sierra crest.

-  Paved Road
-  Unpaved Road
-  Native Material
-  Paved Trail
-  Mainline Town/City
-  Spur Town/City
-  Counties
-  Roads
-  Water
-  USFS
-  BLM
-  Other Federal Agencies
-  Non-governmental Organization
-  Other State Agencies
-  County/Regional Agency Land
-  City Land
-  Private Conservation; Private Corporation; Joint, Other, Unknown
-  Census Designated Place
-  Recreation Opportunities



Bear Valley to Groveland

Traversing the heart of the central Sierra, this segment links Bear Valley to Groveland via dirt forest roads, historic doubletrack, and non-motorized singletrack. From Bear Valley, the alignment descends into the deeply incised Stanislaus River canyon, using historic logging railroad grades and unpaved U.S. Forest Service service roads to navigate steep vertical relief. The trail winds through mid-elevation mixed-conifer forests dominated by sugar pine and incense cedar, passing north of Calaveras Big Trees and crossing rugged river drainages within the Stanislaus National Forest. Avoiding all paved thoroughfares, the route uses backcountry utility corridors and dirt fire roads to provide access spurs to local communities while maintaining continuous north-south travel. As the tread ascends out of the Tuolumne River watershed, it transitions to packed dirt and decomposed granite singletrack, offering expansive canyon views and quiet mountain solitude before terminating at the forested ridgelines framing the gateway community of Groveland.

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-  Recreation Opportunities



Groveland to Mariposa

The southernmost segment connects Groveland to the historic county seat of Mariposa via an expansive network of unpaved mountain roads, foothill singletrack, and primitive doubletrack. Leaving Groveland, the alignment heads south through the Stanislaus and Sierra national forests, staying well above paved valley corridors. The route traverses rolling oak woodlands, chaparral brushlands, and pine-forested ridges, then descends into the dramatic, deeply carved Merced River canyon. Using backcountry U.S. Forest Service dirt roads, decommissioned flume beds, and historic trail rights-of-way, the alignment avoids paved highways while providing backcountry access across challenging canyon terrain. Users navigate packed-dirt bench-cut trails and primitive ridge roads, experiencing rich gold-mining heritage, working foothill landscapes, and expansive views toward western Yosemite. Passing through remote public lands, the trail weaves through foothill creek drainages before culminating in soft-surface dirt singletrack that leads directly into the historic mountain town of Mariposa.

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-  Paved Trail
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-  Census Designated Place
-  Recreation Opportunities





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Next Steps and Opportunities



Image: Jesse Pluim, Bureau of Land Management

What's Next

Opportunities

Loop Connections

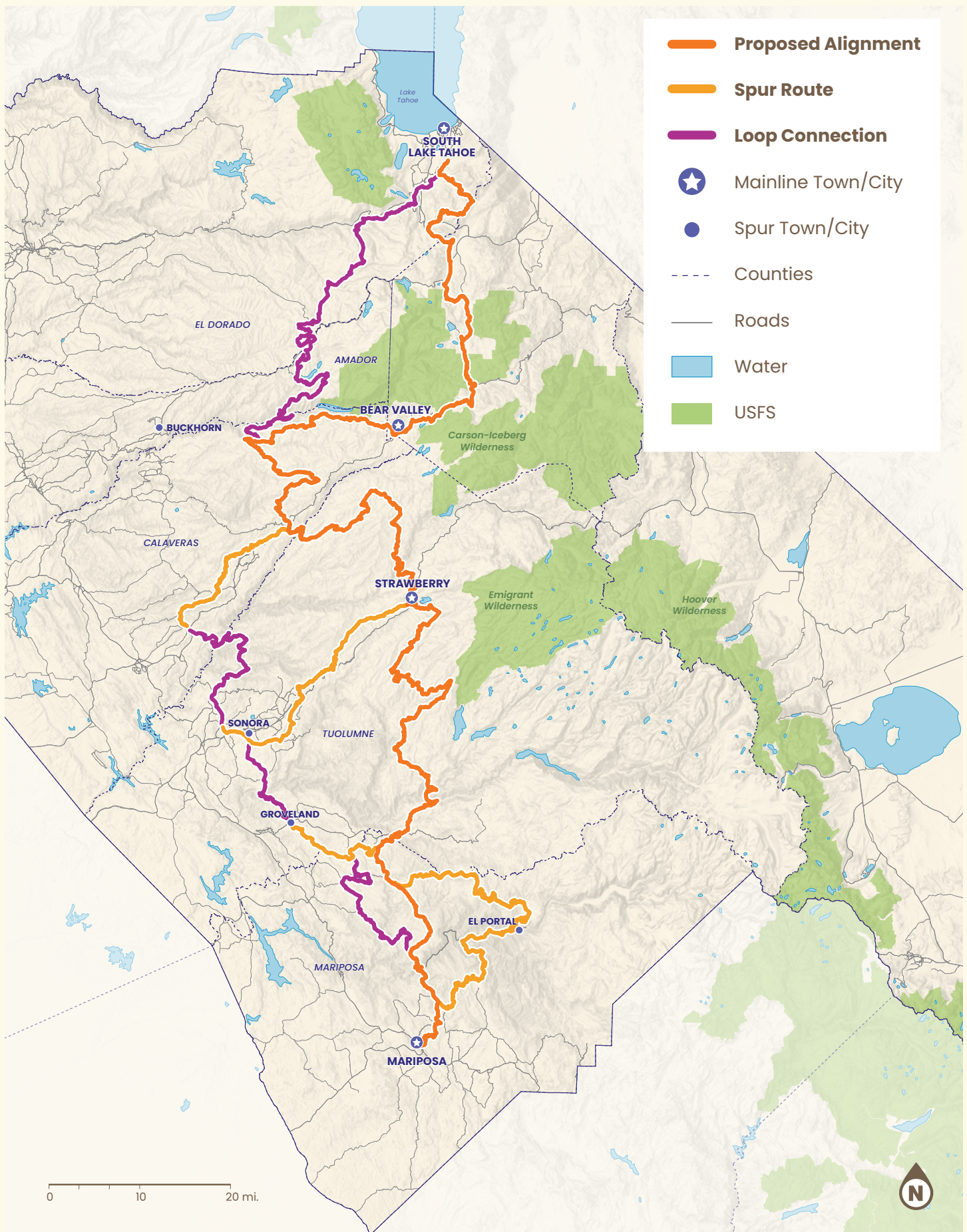
Future implementation phases can use the network's dedicated town spurs to create localized multi-day loop itineraries, allowing trail users to experience high-country backcountry travel alongside historic mountain settlement infrastructure. A prime example is a multi-day loop that links the primary north-south spine to designated spur routes serving Buckhorn, Strawberry, and Sonora.

Departing the western low-elevation spur at Buckhorn, mountain bikers, bikepackers, and trail runners can head east along unpaved forest roads and ridge singletrack to the Sierra high country near Strawberry for an evening resupply. From Strawberry, users follow the main north-south spine south, then descend the dedicated western spur into historic downtown Sonora.

Users can then complete the circuit by navigating dirt timber roads and multi-use corridors north back to Buckhorn. Similar sub-regional loops can be linked between Sonora and Groveland, or between Groveland and Mariposa. These multi-day loop options make long-distance non-motorized travel accessible to weekend visitors who lack time for a full thru-trip, distribute trail use across manageable geographic sectors, and ensure continuous access to backcountry terrain and rural service hubs.

Sierra Jobs First: Economic Benefits and Community Support

Developing a continuous non-motorized trail network across the western Sierra offers a transformational economic development strategy for gateway communities transitioning to sustainable recreation economies. By connecting backcountry singletrack directly to town spur routes, human-powered tourism—including mountain biking, long-distance trail running, and bikepacking—injects direct consumer spending into rural foothill economies. Trail users generate distributed demand for local lodging, restaurants, gear shops, outfitters, and shuttle services, capturing recreation dollars that typically bypass rural downtown corridors. Unlike motorized or highway-bound transit, non-motorized trail networks encourage multi-day stays, extending visitor residency and boosting local tax revenues in historic mining and timber towns. Furthermore, establishing a nationally recognized long-distance alignment positions these mountain communities as primary hubs for outdoor recreation investment, encouraging local entrepreneurship, supporting seasonal and year-round jobs, and fostering community stewardship of surrounding public lands.



Next Steps

Successful realization of the proposed alignment detailed throughout this study is contingent upon the collaboration and coordination of county partners, land management agencies, tribes, residents, and volunteers. Given the existing conditions encountered on the proposed route and the various opportunities and challenges presented along the way, coupled with the resource-intensive requirements of operating and maintaining a variety of infrastructure, it is essential that a dynamic, flexible leadership group be established to help nurture and guide the alignment's development. The following recommended next steps are offered for consideration by land management agencies, tribes, and their partners in El Dorado, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and Mariposa counties. Once established, this group should connect with local and regional "Friends Of" and other volunteer groups that support outdoor access and recreation to leverage their membership networks and partners to gather input, raise awareness, and marshal resources.

Ongoing Agency Coordination, Review, and Support

Continued collaboration with agency partners will be essential for reviewing and refining the trail alignment. Allocating paid time for agency review will help ensure thorough assessments and aid with timely decision-making, particularly with reduction-in-force efforts undertaken by the federal government. Maintaining open communication with agencies will be key to navigating federal regulations and securing necessary approvals for a safe and legally compliant system.

Ongoing Community Engagement

Continued outreach to the small and unincorporated communities throughout the study area to gather input on potential local recreation opportunities is recommended. Engaging with local planning groups and community advisory committees offers an effective and locally grounded framework for addressing community-specific questions, priorities, and concerns early in the process. As the effort gains momentum, proactive communication with these communities is a critical next step to ensure that future efforts reflect local values and needs.

Ongoing Tribal Coordination

Continued collaboration with tribal councils is essential to ensure the success of this route and avoid any conflict with significant tribal sites. Future studies should focus on continued tribal coordination. In addition to ensuring protection of cultural resources, consideration should be given to partnering with tribal nations to support tribally led efforts to increase awareness of the cultural history of the Western Sierra region through storytelling and placekeeping.

Study and Confirm Preferred Alignment

While this plan identifies a feasible north-south alignment between South Lake Tahoe and Mariposa with accompanying spur/loop connections to towns and recreational areas utilizing existing facilities, additional opportunities to refine key segments, connect communities, and provide access to campgrounds and points of interest remain. This refinement requires close coordination with the partners mentioned above, as well as private property owners and local stakeholders. These conversations may best be coordinated by the leadership group, to ensure local decisions complement network-wide functionality of the final alignment. Ground truthing of potential alternative segments should be considered essential in order to deliver an enjoyable user experience.

Conduct Further Environmental Analysis

Future environmental analysis may be required by land management agencies in areas of special concern, or for the maintenance of existing or installation of new infrastructure. Because this plan leverages existing infrastructure and does not recommend modifying currently allowable uses, many segments are already included in infrastructure inventories approved for through use by the appropriate land management agency. For instance, environmental review may be required for potential increased use in special resource areas or for installation of facilities or signage to support this route. Land management agencies have requested implementation in phases leveraging already approved routes to better understand any potential increases in recreational use.

Establish Trail Identification Markers

Simple wayfinding signage at trailheads and along the route will improve the navigability and designation of the route. It is important that the signage details allowable uses to help manage expectations and maintain compliance with land-use regulations and protect natural and historic resources. These efforts will improve wayfinding, promote responsible recreation, and support long-term trail sustainability.

Maintenance and Workforce Development

As the final alignment is officially recognized and route signage is installed, establishing a sustainable maintenance strategy will be essential for long-term success. One potential model is the use of nonprofit trail crews dedicated to north-south corridor maintenance similar to the approaches taken by the Pacific Crest Trail Association and the Tahoe Rim Trail Association. These examples demonstrate the value of community-driven stewardship and consistent upkeep. A similar structure could play a vital role in maintaining the integrity, safety, and accessibility of the Towns to Trails network over time.

Integrate Wildfire Resilience into Trail Planning

The California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force's "Joint Strategy for Sustainable Outdoor Recreation and Wildfire Resilience" offers a timely opportunity to align recreation planning with wildfire resilience. The Towns to Trails alignment can support this strategy by identifying segments of the trail network that could also function as strategic fire breaks. This is especially relevant near campgrounds and other high-use recreation areas. Incorporating dual-purpose trail design—serving both recreation and fire protection—can enhance community safety, protect natural landscapes, and contribute to local economic resilience. Collaboration with land management agencies and wildfire experts will be essential to identify priority zones and integrate these goals into future trail development.



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