

Opinion: Giving thanks to sugar pine lovers

By Maria Mircheva

In the time of Thanksgiving, we at the Sugar Pine Foundation are thinking of the people and organizations that have made our work possible. We are especially thankful to the Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation and Patagonia, our first funders, but also to all our partners and volunteers.

Twelve years ago, the Sugar Pine Foundation was just an idea. The idea was that sugar pines are beautiful trees that are under threat and we need to do whatever we can to preserve them. Sugar pines have the striking, long pine cones that people use to make holiday decorations.

All white pines in the Tahoe basin – sugar pine, western white pine and white bark pine – have important ecological roles to provide food and shelter to birds and animals, and contribute to forest diversity and resilience. Unfortunately, there is a nonnative invasive fungus, called white pine blister rust that infects all white pines. This fungus has been in the area for the last 20 years. Land managers have agreed that the most effective restoration strategy is to find seed trees that are naturally resistant to the fungus and plant their progeny.

That was the idea behind starting the Sugar Pine Foundation. At first it was just a couple of guys in the forest shooting a sling shot to get pine cones from healthy sugar pines. They were lucky that the Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation board decided that this was a worthwhile effort and funded the search for blister rust resistant sugar pine trees. Since then, the Sugar Pine Foundation has flourished into a full blown small nonprofit that plants 10,000 sugar pines a year with the help of 700 volunteers.

Today, the Sugar Pine Foundation has three part-time staff and a six-person board of directors. The Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation, through the Nature Fund, Martis Fund, Tahoe Donner Fund, Wiesner Fund and a few other funds has contributed more than \$100,000 to our efforts. Various other organizations, including Patagonia, American Forests, Tree Cyler, Arbor Foundation, National Forest Foundation, Rose Foundation, Tahoe Mountain Resorts Foundation, Truckee Tahoe Airport District and Bently Foundation have made significant contributions as well.

This year marks the planting of our 100,000 tree. To find planting sites, we partner with all the land-managing agencies in Tahoe – the U.S. Forest Service, California and Nevada state parks, California Tahoe Conservancy, Truckee Donner Land Trust, Tahoe Donner Forestry, Vail Resorts and various other public and private landowners. Our planting sites are often fire scars, but also areas where the forest was mechanically or hand thinned.

Countless local schoolchildren and community volunteers have helped us plant seedlings and we would like to thank all of them – students from North and South Tahoe middle schools, Tahoe Expedition Academy, Sierra Expeditionary School, Forest Charter School, Lake Tahoe Community College, Sierra Nevada College, University of Nevada, SOS Outreach, Tahoe Turning Point, Girls and Boy Scouts, all Rotary clubs, Patagonia, Vail, Southwest Gas, Bently, Nevada Energy, Hyatt, Starbucks, Hard Rock and Harrah's and Harveys employees, and everyone else.

There are a lot of challenges to our forests these days. Years of fire suppression have left the forests too dense and have heightened the risks of wildfires, drought and pathogen mortality. A bark beetle epidemic took place in the southern and central Sierra last year. Sugar pines were hit hard by mountain pine beetle in North Tahoe. Mistletoe is widespread on Jeffrey pines on the East Shore. Fir engraver beetle and

root rot are damaging white firs on the West Shore. The warming weather is exacerbating fires, drought and bark beetle outbreaks. Nonnative invasive species are taking a toll on the ecosystem especially when other disturbances are present. As beneficiaries of clean water, beauty, shade, and other ecosystem benefits of the forest, we have a responsibility to manage our forests and keep them healthy. Reforestation is a part of that effort: it benefits both forest and ecosystem health, and helps decrease carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Thanks to all our supporters for being a part of it!

Maria Mircheva is executive director of the Sugar Pine Foundation.