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California, nonprofits form coalition to protect Sierra

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TRUCKEE – From the shores of Donner Lake on Wednesday, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger praised the creation of a private, non-profit coalition – the Northern Sierra Partnership – to work with government to protect open space, forests, watersheds and step up efforts to respond to climate change.

"While we are faced with great challenges today, economic challenges ... we should not lose sight of other important issues," Schwarzenegger told a group of regional environmental and business leaders. "We should go ahead and really do everything we can to protect the environment."

The governor said \$25 million has been raised for the partnership, including commitments of \$10 million each from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Morgan Family Foundation.

The partnership is an alliance of five organizations – the Feather River Land Trust, Truckee Donner Land Trust, Sierra Business Council, The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land. Eventually, the group hopes to raise \$100 million, which, combined with public funds, will protect more than 100,000 acres.

Historically, the northern Sierra, from south of Lake Tahoe to Lassen Volcanic National Park, has not garnered as much conservation attention as other parts of the range. Yet rapid population growth and the spread of second homes, golf courses, resorts and other development are putting pressure on the area's wildlife, watersheds and working ranches.

Besides trying to safeguard open space and ranch land from development, the partnership plans to devote more attention to climate change.

"The West, more so than any other region in the continent outside the Arctic, will face the most profound impacts from climate change – and we clearly have already seen them here in the high Sierra," Rhea Suh, conservation and science program officer for the Packard foundation, told the group.

In the Sierra, researchers have tied climate change to a wide range of impacts, including a diminishing snowpack, catastrophic wildfire, receding glaciers and retreat of small mammals upslope.

In August, Schwarzenegger unveiled a state effort called the Sierra Nevada Climate Change Initiative to develop ways to mitigate and adapt to global warming across the 25 million-acre mountain range. He put the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and California Tahoe Conservancy in charge of it.