

December 12, 2007

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Draft
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Dear El Dorado County Planning Commission:

The Draft Oak Management Plan is seriously flawed. Please recommend major improvements so that our oak woodlands, a beautiful El Dorado County asset, are better safeguarded.

Oaks have true value

These oak woodlands have value to the entire ecosystem we live in, as well as to each of us directly. They effect the health of both body and spirit, as well as keeping the county a desirable place to live. This in turn affects all of our property values. Just look at ads for real estate in this and nearby areas. They are selling their subdivisions with photos of oaks and grasslands. The County's Oak Woodland Plan needs to embrace this value, and work to protect the public trust.

PCAs are too limited.

The Priority Conservation Areas cover way too little of the existing oak woodlands. They should not be limited to 500 acre parcels, or be out on the outskirts of the county, where development pressure is small anyway. What about the beautiful expanses of oaks along the Highway 50 corridor? Some of these should also be designated as PCAs. Even 40 acre woodlands of oaks can provide healthy populations of oaks and significant habitat for insects, birds, and other animals.

Connectivity

And what about connecting the PCAs together? Isolated stands of oaks many miles apart will not have the genetic diversity to be able to withstand pressures from things like global warming, droughts, or air pollution. Opportunities to connect oak woodlands across Highway 50 still exist, as seen by an examination of air photos.

Off site mitigation fee too low

The price designated for off site mitigation is too low and not realistic. Conservation easements should be closer to 80 or 90% of property values, based on recent purchases of same. The plan's 35% is way too low. The plan would essentially pass the costs of new development from the developer, who stands to gain, to the taxpayer, the loser. El Dorado County residents would have the beautiful assets of our county squandered for the short term gain of one segment of our business community.

Don't lump all oaks together

Another problem with the draft plan is that it lumps all oaks together. Some species, like interior live oaks, regenerate well and could indeed be replaced by new plantings. But what about the valley oaks and blue oaks? For reasons not well understood, these oaks are not regenerating well throughout the state. Sure, there are a lot of blue oaks in the county, but they are mostly mature. Mitigating their loss is not as easy as planting an acorn. I have been trying to get a few blue oaks to grow on our property. I may be finally getting some success by protecting each of the trees with a cage of chicken wire to prevent deer browsing. I have been carefully nurturing them for 5 to 10 years. Who will do this for new blue oaks in the PCAs? The higher value of mature oaks, especially those of poorly regenerating species like the blue oak, should be taken into account by the Oak Management Plan.

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And what about the unique Leather Oak of Pine Hill Reserve? The plan should not leave out this important Quercus species.

Our oaks are vulnerable

Our county is considered one of the most vulnerable areas of oak woodland in the state. These woodlands are not so extensive that they couldn't be destroyed in a single generation. No one thought the vast flocks of passenger pigeons could ever be dented; they are now extinct. The vast prairie herds of buffalo are now reduced to a few remnants on ranches and farms. The once extensive pine forests of the Midwest of our country have all been cleared. The hallmark, common elm of the East has been decimated by disease.

Let's not make the same mistake with El Dorado County's oak woodlands. Let's create a significantly better Management Plan prepared by science consultants- not the one created by nonscientists. Let's really protect the Oak Woodlands, with a much more extensive bank of PCAs, recognition that loss of mature blue oaks is particularly grave, higher offsite mitigation fees, connectivity of oak woodlands, and preservation of the valuable visual oak corridor along Highway 50.

Please do not let pressure from developers cause you to lose sight of true oak woodland protection. No one is telling developers they can't develop their property. The county just needs a better mitigation plan, and developers need a stronger incentive to work around existing expanses of oaks on their land. Please recognize the true value of our Oak Woodlands and do the right thing for **all** county residents.

Thank you,

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