

General Plan Update 2020
Citizen's Advisory Committee
Permit and Resource Management Department
2550 Ventura Avenue
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Sonoma County Planning Commission
2550 Ventura Avenue
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
575 Administration Drive, Room 100 A
Santa Rosa, Ca 95403

June 19, 2003

Re: Timber Conversions

FOR THE PUBLIC RECORD

Background

The issue of timberland conversions to agricultural uses is a vital issue affecting the ecological health of Sonoma County. The large-scale conversion of redwood or other conifer forests, oak woodlands, and native grasslands to intensive or industrial agriculture causes extensive and irreversible environmental impacts. With a lack of preventative regulations at the County level, and questionable oversight being given by the California Department of Forestry, the need to protect our forestlands must be regarded as a priority in the formulation of the County General Plan. In order to extend these protections to the maximum number of timber and wildlands throughout the county, protection of forestland must be included throughout the Timber Production Zones (TPZ) and Resource and Rural Development Zones (RRD). While we recognize the importance and support the maintenance of viable lands suitable for agricultural uses, there are already many protections for agriculture within the existing General Plan under agricultural zoning designations. We believe that agriculture and forest protection can coexist while protecting remaining forestland against further harmful development.

Impacts

The conversion of forestland includes many immediate as well as unforeseen ecological impacts. The most common include habitat fragmentation, water diversion, soil erosion, and water pollution. Construction and maintenance impacts such as fences are known to impede wildlife movements, and access roads carve the way toward other subsequent developments that can further reduce the number of net wildlands. Cumulative impacts such as increased runoff and sedimentation can cause severe harm to recovering watersheds and anadromous fish populations. Furthermore, the introduction of chemicals

present in herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides widely used in industrial agriculture have been found to create major disruptions in soil microclimates which can produce many long term negative health effects at the microbial level and throughout the food chain. The cumulative removal of forestland has a negative effect on an ecosystem's ability to regulate local microclimates and produce and retain groundwater. The recent studies of redwood forests' remarkable ability to retain groundwater through fog-drip contribution is testament to their importance as well as ongoing global studies confirming forests' importance in keeping increases in carbon dioxide in check by converting carbon into cellulose and releasing oxygen through photosynthesis.

Recommendation

In order to insure the long term health and the greatest level of protection for our forest ecosystems, we support the adoption of **Option Three** as outlined in the June 20, 2002 Staff Report. This option would affect an estimated 194,000 acres of the 230,000 acres of timberland in Sonoma County. It includes specific language that would protect natural resource lands, watersheds, critical biotic areas, as well as fish and wildlife habitat. Protection against intensive development of lands constrained by geologic hazards, steep slopes, poor slopes, poor soils or poor water, fire and flood prone areas, biotic and scenic areas, and other constraints is also included in this option. Option Three, while expanding the county's jurisdiction to protect forestland, would prohibit agricultural production and other uses which would result in the permanent conversion of timberlands.

Conclusion

As organizations and individuals representing diverse interests throughout Sonoma County, we collectively realize that the protection of our remaining forest ecosystems is a crucial and integral part of maintaining the overall ecological health of our future. The protection of Sonoma County's forestlands is as critical to humans as it is to the wildlife that depends on them for sustenance. We recognize that the continued conversion of timberlands to intensive agriculture continues to cause serious threats to impaired watersheds and wildlands that have already been subject to years of mismanagement. We also contend that further cumulative impacts associated with future conversions and alteration of the landscape will cause irreversible ecological damage. We support Option Three as formulated by County staff because it encourages the maximum protection for forestlands in the most critical of land use zones. We urge staff to consider the recommendations and endorsements of Option Three as provided by the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, Fifth District Supervisor Mike Reilly, and all the signatories of this letter included below.

Sincerely,

The following are Signatories to this Letter:

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