

Resolving Oak Woodland Issues in California¹

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The Resources Agency is the umbrella State agency for many of the departments working with California's natural resources. The Departments of Forestry and Fire Protection, Fish and Game, and Water Resources are a part of the collection of departments within the State's Resources Agency.

One of the most important things we do, especially on resource issues, is pulling together groups of people to discuss, to engage, and to shape policy. Most natural resource issues are resolved by collaborative solutions, and most often, they're compromises. An example of policy development is taking place right here at Cal Poly during this Symposium. This involves concerns about conversion of oak woodlands due to development of a water pipeline right-of-way. There are major issues here today as oaks as threatened to be cleared as part of the construction of a new water pipeline to the Central Coast. We are issuing a stop work order to allow meaningful conversations to proceed in order to reach a compromise on this issue. The more we engage people at the local level, the more we can continue to push local solutions.

Pressure on Oak Woodlands

Since the earliest of times in California, oaks have had value. From our State's Native Americans and their historic values for oaks and acorns, to the whole complement of uses that created new values for the historic people of California, to today's most aggressive home builders, our oaks have maintained a high value. Because they have this high value, oaks are going to continue to be part of the policy discussions that occur in this State. We're not going to destroy the oaks in this state because they are valuable. It is important to appreciate and stress those values, which will allow oaks and oak woodlands to continue to be a part of California's culture in all the myriad of ways they have historically been.

It is important to bring the question of how many oaks there are going to be, and where they will be distributed, to the forefront. To do this, it is necessary to look at all the pressures on oak woodlands. This is certainly a major thrust of this Symposium.

There are differences in the value of oaks from a regional perspective. There is an increasing interest in the use of oaks for commercial purposes, such as sawn wood, and all the value-added products which can be produced from oak trees. In the North Coast, tanoak, although not a true oak species, is receiving a great deal of emphasis as a commercial product. In Southern California, we have all witnessed the pressure and intensity on our oak woodlands that comes from development. In this region, the value of oaks must be placed in the context of overall ecosystem and how those values are balanced with development. This balance will be influenced by the increasingly high values placed on housing and land due to the presence of oaks.

Identifying and describing values of oak woodlands are not enough information to involve the key members of a community or region in determining

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policies for oak conservation. This important step needs to be tied to research, education, and to outreach efforts, to bring the issues before the people at the local level, and gain their participation in ensuring that their lands are appropriately planned in the context of all the competing needs. This additional step ensures many new perspectives, and a grasp of those “compromises of values.” The conversations will be varied in the North Coast discussing tan oak, in the Sierra foothills discussing oak clearing practices on rangelands, or in San Diego County discussing urban development. There is no single statewide approach that would work for this myriad of issues. It is very important to engage as many participants as possible at the local level in collaborative efforts to attain the right type of protection, the right type of conservation, and the right kinds of development that are worthwhile to all future generations.

The Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program (IHRMP) and the California Oak Foundation (COF) are key players in identifying the issues. The COF and IHRMP raised the issue of “values” to the Board of Forestry. Issues such as esthetics, abatement of noise and air pollution, shade, watershed protection, biodiversity of animals and plants that live in oak woodland areas, and agricultural production and values raised by the California Cattleman’s Association, the Wool Growers, and Farm Bureau must all be considered in the protection and the utilization of our oak woodlands and rangelands.

Developing collaborative efforts requires evaluation of real threats. Too often, policy making is undertaken without the “real” information being on the table. Certainly, California’s oaks are under attack, and they’re under attack primarily from conversion to human developments. In fact, from 1945 to 1973, approximately 1.2 million acres of oak woodland were converted to other land uses. By 1986, that loss had escalated to almost 14,000 acres per year. Since 1986, there has been a huge escalation in the conversion of oak woodlands for development purposes. This level of conversion cannot be sustained for much longer. This conversion has fragmented oak woodlands, posing a serious threat, not just to the oaks themselves, but to the biodiversity of oak woodlands. That is of major concern in the state of California. Our concerns must consider the broad landscapes, and how to protect and maintain natural corridors of open space to maintain all species which we wish to preserve for future generations.

As an additional threat, we also need to look at the unregulated use of wildlands for all kinds of recreational uses. Wildlands can sustain only a certain number of feet, so many campfires, and so many little trips, before it has lost its “wild” character, and becomes an area that one no longer wishes to visit. How many people are using the areas, and what is the long-term impact of those people?

Fire represented another threat to oak woodlands. Part of my position with the Resources Agency involves dealing with fire risk and fire risk assessment. As the “edge effect” to our oak rangelands from human encroachment into wildlands comes more into play, these areas become vulnerable to man-caused threats. As these edge areas become even more pronounced, more and more oak woodlands will be subjected to the possibility of catastrophic fire, as we are seeing with softwood forests throughout the Sierra Nevada and North State. Since most of these wildlands and forested areas are experiencing an increase in fuel loading, fire intensities have increased. Therefore, our losses will be higher. In the South State, with dry fuel conditions, a Mediterranean climate, and an increasing “edge” with human developments, fire will continue to be a high risk into the future.

Solutions to Oak Woodland Conservation

With some of the risks and threats to oak woodlands described above, we need to focus on solutions. Unfortunately, we often get caught up in discussing and re-discussing the problems, and then reiterating it so that everybody “really” understands. This inefficient cycle typically takes 80 percent of our time, leaving only 20 percent of our time to focus on the solution. In discussing conservation solutions, I try to use only 20 percent of the time defining the problem, and 80 percent of the time discussing possible solutions. There are a huge number of stakeholders and responsibilities involved in maintaining sustainable oak woodlands in all its forms. It is time to divide many of these responsibilities between the appropriate stakeholders. Although this may have been ill-defined in the past, events like this symposium can redefine areas of need and stakeholders’ responsibilities.

Certainly, when discussing fragmentation of landscapes and suitability of habitat over county lines and thousands of acres, one community is not going to resolve all the issues in their action plan. However, a good role for government is to encourage state, regional, and county organizations to work together resolving mutual resource issues. Another appropriate role for government is to provide the “big picture” overview in support of county-wide conservation and development efforts. This “big picture” also provides everyone an opportunity to see how these components are going to work across the state.

At the community level, whether it’s overdevelopment or other issues which inhibit the sustainability of local oak woodlands, it is the involvement of locally elected supervisors and council people, planners, educators, research organizations, and groups like the IHRMP and COF that can focus the issues and bring together local resolutions that provide sound management policy that can be integrated with bordering areas and jurisdictions.

Since it is not possible to grow an oak in 5 years, it is imperative to stay engaged in local issues and policies. There is no large umbrella that is covering everything that’s happening throughout the state, although this is often our sense of government. Government is like a double-edged sword. Sometimes, it’s way too invasive, and at other times, it isn’t doing enough. It is difficult to reconcile this mixture of feelings and emotions. Secretary Wheeler has made it a priority of the Resources Agency to find ways to encourage issues to be resolved at the local level. It is very important to him that local communities are involved and assisted in the identification of resolutions to local issues.

With all the people and communities involved with oak woodland issues, it is possible to avoid the problems seen with issues affecting softwoods. However, it is important to keep pressure on all parties on the various aspects of the issues, and to continue to develop possible compromises that may need to be considered in developing successful policy and community guidelines. Many people at this Symposium have brought many of the issues to the forefront and are working toward resolutions that can be supported by all the stakeholders.

The issues and information affecting California’s oak woodlands are before us. We can thank former Board of Forestry chair Hal Walt for the information which has brought us to this point. Hal was responsible for the first appropriation to get the Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program started, and funding focused on getting some early solutions. The Cattlemen’s Association, Wool Growers, and Farm Bureau also played key roles in these early efforts and remain engaged in these issues at the local levels. Peter Passof and James Bartolome of the University of California (UC) and Bob Ewing of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) are all early developers of the

Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program and are responsible for a tremendous amount of information that has evolved about oak management, conservation, and preservation. Rick Standiford of UC, Cathy Bleier of CDF, Barry Garrison of the California Department of Fish and Game, and many others have also made substantial contributions to our knowledge and emerging technologies.

It is important to acknowledge once again the California Oak Foundation and its president, Janet Cobb, who has kept the issues in front of us; Norm Pillsbury, of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, who has developed and maintained support of these great oak symposia; and Director Richard Wilson of CDF and Dave Neff and others who have worked diligently on many issues, especially the fire and “edge” issues. I would also like to recognize Helen Lebieu and others from the conservation community, who have devoted a tremendous amount of time keeping the issues on the center stage.

Conclusions

Our challenge is to take the awareness of the issue and the foundations of information that has evolved, engage your community’s leaders, and take some giant steps toward local resolutions. Over the next several days, you will have an opportunity to watch some key oak issues played out here at Cal Poly.

It is often difficult to turn large processes toward a new focus. However, a large process can obtain a new focus with the assistance of only a few key people. But it takes the efforts of key leaders, who are dedicated to making a difference that reflects and incorporates local community’s values.

Issues affecting oak woodlands are not simple issues. However, they are issues that can ultimately meet part of everybody’s needs. We need to put the awareness of issues and compiled information to work for us in forums in our schools, communities, counties, and regions to attain our short-term goals. This will also allow the issues to mature and information to grow so that goals may be established and accomplished for the next 2 to 5 decades. If we are successful in these endeavors, future generations may not have to resolve the number of critical issues we have faced. You can be assured that the state, through my efforts and those of the Governor and the Secretary of the Resource Agency, will work very hard to keep oak woodlands at the forefront of state policy resulting in progressive kinds of solutions that are important to all Californians.