

March 8, 2021

Re: Mendocino Oak Tree and Oak Woodland Protection Ordinance

Dear Mendocino County Supervisors,

Would you be sad if your grandchildren grew up in a world with few birds and little birdsong? A world in which it was rare to see deer and elk, and almost impossible to see wood ducks, deer, bears, peregrine falcons, or golden eagles? Such a world is likely if we lose our mature oaks.

Throughout the United States, mature oaks are the most important trees for songbirds, and Mendocino County is no exception. Why? Because most baby songbirds need to be fed caterpillars to survive to adulthood, and the large leafy canopies of mature oaks are the best caterpillar “restaurants” they have. Oaks host 500 caterpillar species that have, over millennia, co-evolved with them and become immune to their toxins. You can’t plant any other tree in place of an oak and expect to find nearly as many caterpillars.

And those other animals I mentioned also depend on oaks. Acorns are a vital part of the diets of wood ducks, deer, and bears; peregrine falcons, golden eagles and other raptors prey on animals that eat acorns. No other North American tree or shrub produces such large quantities of nutrient-dense food as an oak.

Mendocino’s oaks also sequester enormous amounts of carbon. To stay true to its carbon sequestration goals, the county should recognize and protect each mature oak as an invaluable carbon sink. Mature oaks also stabilize and enrich soil, improve the nutritional quality of forage for grazing animals, slow water run-off, shelter countless animal species, shade creeks and rivers, and make our world more beautiful.

Planting acorns does not make up for the loss of mature oaks, no matter the ratio. Most oak seedlings do not make it to adulthood, and those that do don’t perform equivalent ecosystem services for 80 years or more. Permitted removals of mature oaks should be rare, last-resort solutions and should be accompanied by costly fees, including carbon penalties. These fees should be high enough to incentivize a landowner, no matter how wealthy, to seek other solutions.

The ordinance should also impose penalties stiff enough to deter even wealthy landowners or businesses from removing mature oaks illegally. It should include a budget for monitoring and enforcing its provisions, as well as a budget for educating the public about its regulations and the reasons for them.

I wholeheartedly support an Oak Tree and Oak Woodland Protection Ordinance, but only one that provides stronger protections for mature oaks than the one you are currently considering. We have already lost many mature oaks to fire and drought, and are losing

more every year. Please be the supervisors that future generations will remember as the ones who had the foresight and courage preserve Mendocino County's uniquely pristine oak woodlands. I envision the day when Mendocino Oak Woodland State Park will be the last large oak woodland oasis in the state and will draw thousands of visitors every year.

Karen Marianchild