

I am writing in support of comments to be made today by Anderson Valley Superintendent of Schools Louise Simonson as well as on behalf of the Anderson Valley High School Agriculture Department Students (past and present), Teacher and FFA Advisor Beth Swehla AND the many dedicated livestock producers throughout Mendocino County.

As you are likely now aware, there have been a string of mountain lion attacks on livestock in Anderson Valley. The most recent, to my knowledge, occurred at Anderson Valley High School earlier this week. Beth Swehla was tending to the goats that reside on the school farm (an integral part to the educational experience in the Agriculture Program at AVHS) when she found two, very pregnant goats dead and another injured. The responding California Department of Fish and Wildlife Warden was unable to offer her any assistance as per regulations/policy established by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors, the county no longer contracts with a trapper. The other option for depredation is to dispatch the predator with a firearm... not a good idea in a populated area and firearms are generally frowned upon on school campuses. This is infuriating and an unacceptable loss for the high school community. An emboldened mountain lion wandering onto campus looking for a meal is a safety risk, not only for the goats but for the students who often tend to them (and the addition of livestock guardian dogs is neither fool proof or recommended on small acreage or at a school site). The goats are a vital part of the living educational laboratory that not only teaches animal husbandry skills but develops those soft skills (of hard work, commitment, responsibility and dedication) that are even more vital to development of the character of our next generation of leaders. In my years as an educator in Mendocino County, and even now working with a different population, Beth Swehla's students develop into incredible human beings in part because of the skills they gain in her program and the high standard she sets for character development (and now they are going to learn about grass-roots politics).

The AVHS Agriculture Department predation issue is an indicator of the larger county-wide problem caused by the BOS failure to provide trapping services to the agriculture community of the county. Mendocino County's history runs deep with contributions from the Agriculture Industry. Animal agriculture provides both valuable commodities and services to the county (and state as a whole). While mountain lions and other apex predators have their place in our ecosystem, their overpopulation (especially when drought reduces their opportunities to access their natural prey) places an undue burden on livestock producers when their livelihoods are systematically preyed upon by predators who should be hunting elsewhere. Grazing provides vital services to the community by accomplishing two things, first, by reducing the fire fuel load by removing dense grass and overgrown brush and second by converting those fuels to commodities (meat and fiber) that reduce our carbon footprint in a truly renewable fashion.

It is my sincere hope that the board will reconsider their previous action in support of not only the AVHS Agriculture Department but the larger population of Livestock Producers in Mendocino County. I leave you with a quote off of my favorite old FFA t-shirt, "What would you be without agriculture? Naked and hungry".

In solidarity,
Catherine Acly
Agriculture Teacher - WHS 1999-2006