

## **Forests: What is the Best Option to Protect Them?**

The **Sierra Club favors the strong Option 3**, which prohibits timberland conversions. The Sierra Club urges the strongest protection for our forestlands so that future generations will never ask: "Why is Sonoma County part of the Redwood Empire?" Instead, the remaining forests will be preserved, and future citizens will see the Redwood Empire with their own eyes. They will have their concerned citizens of today to thank for that. **Please call and email your Supervisors** and let them know you want the strongest possible protections!

The Sonoma County Planning Commission is currently considering adopting (**among better alternatives**) a proposal which has misleadingly been referred to as the 'No Net Loss' of forestlands Option (Option 5). We say misleadingly because this Option actually allows for the loss (conversion to intensive agriculture, usually vineyards) of 1/3 of our forestland, provided that another 2/3 is either 'restored' or left intact. However, an **acre of forest lost is an acre lost**, and the standards of restoration envisioned in the proposal are vague and inadequate, and no thought at all has been given in Option 5 to the issue of **habitat fragmentation** which will be introduced by more forest conversions - even though the Citizen's Advisory Committee had recommended to the Planning Commission that protection measures be adopted to meet this concern.

The need for urgency in strengthening forest protections comes from the many recent applications to replace coastal redwood forest with vineyards in the West County. The largest ever such project in Northern California is now being designed on a 19,000 acre parcel in the Gualala River watershed. 1,900 acres, of it, in particular, are in peril of permanent conversion to intensive agriculture and 'starter castle' residential development, all of it much more likely to happen if spurious 'No Net Loss' measures are adopted. The project is cleverly named "Preservation Ranch", and the development team is headed by an entrepreneur from Napa, William Hill. The funding is largely being supplied by the public employees of California through **backing supplied by CalPERS**, the state body entrusted with investing their retirement savings. Other conversion projects are in the pipeline. "The acreage of conversion requests currently pending at CDF in 2005 is greater than all the conversions approved over the last decade." -- PRMD

Whatever option is adopted will ultimately involve **194,000 acres of forest**. The discussion of these options has been billed in some of the local press as a dispute between vineyardists generally and environmentalists, but at the first (well-attended) meeting of the Planning Commission on this issue, hardly any public comment was offered by either vineyardists or environmentalists in support of County Staff's own favored Option 5, while a great deal of criticism was offered against that Option, even by the Preservation Ranch proponents. Option 5 has even been called by some vineyardists, a band-aid in the wrong place.

We are discussing here land much of which has already been seriously overlogged, and which lies in a watershed already **listed for both temperature and sediment impairments**, and which badly needs to recover. Biologists and ecologists agree that conversion of forest to intensive agriculture causes fundamental changes in ecological and physical processes that maintain wildlife and the vital qualities of water, land, and air.

An acre of forest and habitat lost, is an acre lost – and this includes any acre of oak woodland habitat lost to a reforestation scheme which doesn't work. The attempted restoration of forest which is now being touted by some in this regard is very difficult and lengthy; ultimately, it could take hundreds of years to restore forests and their **vital ecosystem functions and structures** to anything like pristine conditions, even where this is possible. Even to produce healthy uneven-aged secondary conditions is quite problematic; it is a labor-intensive and expensive process, with small guarantee of success of preserving a natural species composition and integrity. In a hundred years, it will be rather too late to notice: “So sorry, but that didn't work out very well, did it?”

Why are we concerned about forestland protection? Forests are home to more than one half of the Earth's species and the clearing and destructive logging of forests is the single greatest cause of species jeopardy worldwide. In a nutshell, then, **'No Net Loss' doesn't add up**. Doing the math, Option 5 could permit the clearcutting and permanent loss of one third of our forestland. As bad as that is, it gets worse, because we'd end up with a sort of Swiss cheese configuration of fragmented forest (an acre here, an acre there) that would result in even greater habitat fragmentation. 'No Net Loss' is a misnomer and should more accurately be labeled **'No Net Protection'**.

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