

Protecting and Promoting Healthy Oak Woodlands

By EMILY PENFIELD - LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

William Randolph Hearst, when he began building his world-renowned estate on a hill at San Simeon, determined that no live oak trees were to be removed. It was up to Julia Morgan, his architect, to uphold his vision, which she successfully accomplished largely through her design and, in one case, with some brilliant engineering. When faced with the daunting challenge of moving six mature live oaks – an unprecedented task in 1909 – Morgan safely moved them by devising a plan that was as intricate as it was monumental, involving tunneling, concrete girders, and timbers and rollers. Four of those six majestic oaks are still alive today.

In San Luis Obispo County, oak woodland now covers more than 36% of our landscape, which is a remnant of what once was – even in the recent past. In the Salinas River Valley, for example, 70 percent of the valley oaks were removed in 1979.

We're not alone. Throughout the state, the California icon is disappearing at the alarming rate of 14,000 acres a year.

Today, another woman has stepped up to the task of preserving California's oak woodlands. State Senator Sheila Kuehl, D-Los Angeles, authored Senate Bill 1334, which became law on Jan. 1, 2005. Up until this time, no regional or statewide strategy existed to conserve oak woodlands. The bill brings oak woodland habitat protection under the California Environmental Quality Act and establishes an Oak Woodlands Conservation Fund. It requires that each county adopt an oak woodlands management plan, including mitigation measures if a proposed project has a serious impact on oak woodlands.

Even prior to the Kuehl bill, the County of San Luis Obispo had a voluntary plan in place. The San Luis Obispo Native Tree Committee is a diverse coalition that encourages oak woodland protection and enhancement through land owner education and outreach. The County also imposes fines for the removal of oak trees without



permit, although enforcement is not always carried through and some view the fines as inadequate.

In August 2006, an Oak Tree Resources Committee, headed by county Supervisor Jim Patterson, was formed. The committee considered proposing an oak tree ordinance requiring mandatory protection of oak woodlands but opted to continue with the voluntary plan for the near future.

Their most crucial recommendation, however, has not been adopted and is still up for consideration. That is the hiring of additional staff to develop and implement the County Voluntary Oak Woodlands Management Program.

Just as Julia Morgan provided William Randolph Hearst with the means to preserve San Simeon's oaks, Senator Kuehl has given California counties, including ours, the tools to protect our oak woodlands. Now it's up us, as citizens, to see that the county uses these tools.

The League of Women Voters of San Luis Obispo County firmly endorses the preservation of the county's oak woodlands and will continue to support the efforts of the Board of Supervisors and county staff to do so, including urging additional staff as recommended. We urge your support in this effort.

Emily Penfield is vice-president and program chair for the local League of Women Voters, and served as the League's planning and land use director last year. She is also a guide at Hearst Castle.