

To: John Benoit, Executive Director, The Local Agency Formation Commission  
From: Muriel Zeller, 2640 Stagecoach Drive, Valley Springs, CA 95252  
Regarding: The Municipal Service Review (MSR) and Sphere of Influence (SOI) for the Calaveras Resource Conservation District (RCD)  
Date: January 21, 2024

*Via Email*

Dear Mr. Benoit:

Before the resolution accepting the Municipal Service Review (MSR) and Sphere of Influence (SOI) for the Calaveras Resource Conservation District (RCD) is adopted at your meeting tomorrow evening, please consider discussing adding to their scope of work a greater diversity of projects that will truly allow them to benefit agricultural land, open space, and natural resources at our lower elevations. I want the RCD to commit to conserving and restoring oak woodlands, oak savanna, and rangelands to protect the multitude of ecosystem services they provide especially since these lands are most prevalent in the county.

The RCD has already demonstrated an excellent track record of securing grants, and I thank them, in particular, for their multiple fuel reduction grants and successful projects, primarily at higher elevations. However, I believe their mission, which commits them "to protect, improve, and restore the natural resources of Calaveras County," requires applying this mission to their entire SOI.

### **Draft Oak Conservation Ordinance**

As you know, Calaveras County will soon have a draft oak conservation ordinance before the Planning Commission. According to PRC § 21083.4, the county may create its own mitigation measures and, thereby, actually protect and improve oak woodland working landscapes by creating, for example, the *Calaveras County Oak Woodlands Conservation Fund*, to which developers may donate as mitigation for the loss of oak woodlands to discretionary project development. However the county does not want the responsibility.

The current draft county draft oak ordinance says, "17.101.060 Oak Woodland Mitigation 2: The mitigation of oak woodlands shall take place within Calaveras County," and it also says under 17.101.060 C: Contribute funds to the Oak Woodlands Conservation Fund, as established under Fish and Game Code §1363 for the purpose of purchasing oak woodlands

conservation easements as described in by (sic) Public Resources Code § 21083.4. (An applicant that chooses this option may not receive a grant from the Oak Woodlands Conservation Fund as part of project mitigation.)”

The problem is if a developer opts to donate to the state’s Oak Woodland Conservation Fund as mitigation for his/her project, the money will not be used in Calaveras County without the Board of Supervisors creating or designating an entity whose purpose is oak conservation or without the development of one or more specific projects to conserve and protect oak woodlands through the use of conservation easements. In order to receive money from the state fund, the local entity or project would have to apply for a grant, and the success of the grant application is not guaranteed. Thus, the two above statements from the county’s draft oak ordinance under 17.101.060, for all intents and purposes, cannot be reconciled, because the county will not create the conditions under which the money donated to the state fund even has a chance of being returned to Calaveras County.

The draft ordinance is, therefore, internally inconsistent and leaves Calaveras County with fewer oaks and less money. Creating a *Calaveras County Oak Woodlands Conservation Fund* is only one example of how the RCD can help conserve oaks and oak woodlands in its SOI. It could also accept and administer in-lieu fees or act as a mitigation banker. When the draft oak ordinance comes before the Planning Commission, it is well within the RCD's scope of work to at least comment and, perhaps, even become part of the mitigation and restoration process.

### **Draft Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan**

In addition to the draft oak ordinance, the Planning Commission will soon be considering a draft Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan. Again, the RCD can help, for example, by promoting the use of conservation easements to permanently protect open space as natural carbon sinks that remove harmful GHG emissions from the environment. The state of California recognizes the importance of natural and working lands in regard to reducing GHG emissions. In fact, natural and working lands “hold the ultimate solution to addressing climate change and its impacts,” and “Work to better quantify the carbon stored in natural and working lands is continuing, but given the long timelines to change landscapes, action must begin now to restore and conserve these lands. (California’s 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan, page ES13).” We can’t afford to wait.

As the California RCD handout on Carbon Farming notes, “Working landscapes have a significant role to play in reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and mitigating global climate change, particularly through the

sequestering of atmospheric carbon in soils and vegetation. In addition to their carbon-related benefits, well-managed working lands confer significant benefits related to increased water holding capacity in soils, water quality, biodiversity and other positive environmental impacts." I would love to see the local RCD work on the California RCD Carbon Farming Project.

Please work to avoid soil carbon loss and agricultural GHG emissions through the placement of grasslands under conservation easements that prevent intensive cultivation or other uses. The RCD could pursue federal, state, and foundation funding to secure conservation easements on private agricultural and forest lands which are suitable for carbon sequestration, and promote restoration grazing practices and mulching that increase the carbon sequestration capacity of our rangeland. Identify and map priority land for conservation. This will help applicants to secure the funding they need to purchase conservation easements on those lands. Take the steps needed to promote and to qualify Calaveras lands that sequester carbon for state cap and trade funds.

"If we want to take meaningful climate action, we must make smarter land-use decisions that value the carbon storage and sequestration abilities of not only trees and forests but also of California's overlooked shrub lands, grasslands, deserts and riparian corridors. As California communities grow, we must mitigate harmful developments with a sound plan that brings real results. Preserving and restoring the native habitats of this golden state protects our rich biodiversity, benefits communities, and gives us a fighting chance to tackle the climate crisis (Hidden in Plain Sight: California's Native Habitats Are Valuable Carbon Sinks, page 23)."

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Muriel Zeller

Attachment: California Association of Resource Conservation Districts Carbon Farming

CC:

Tom Infusino, Calaveras Planning Coalition Facilitator  
Megan Fiske, Community Action Project Outreach Coordinator  
Colleen Platt and Joyce Techel, MyValleySprings.com  
Calaveras County Resource Conservation District Board of Directors  
Julie Moss-Lewis, Calaveras County Deputy County Counsel