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Bill to protect oak woodlands moves to state Senate



Conifers encroaching on oak woodlands near Bridgeville.
courtesy of University of California Cooperative Extension

By Hunter Cresswell

A bill that would put in place efforts to restore the North Coast's disappearing oak woodlands made it through the state Assembly unanimously Wednesday and now faces the gauntlet of the state Senate floor and various committees before reaching Gov. Jerry Brown's desk.

“Under our current policies we are losing oaks at an alarming rate. This bill will provide a new resource for private land owners to manage their land and

preserve these valuable habitats,” North Coast Assemblyman Jim Wood (D-Healdsburg) said in a press release.

Wood authored the bill, AB 1958, which was sponsored by the North Coast Regional Land Trust, Woods’ spokesman and staffer on the bill Paul Ramey said.

“It hasn’t been done yet,” Ramey said of efforts to help the oaks. “The sooner the better.”

Since fire suppression became a widely used practice in California during the 1930s, conifers and other underbrush that was usually burnt away in fires every year was able to grow and spread unchecked. Fast-growing conifers encroach on oak woodlands and cut existing trees off from sun if nothing is done to stop the spread.

“They’re some of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the North West,” UC Cooperative Extension forest advisor Yana Valachovic said of oak woodlands. “They are preferentially used by a lot of different bird species.”

Yanachovic said she’s finishing a three-year research project on conifer encroachment, and AB 1958, if passed, would put policies in place so people can get rid of the conifers without jumping through as many bureaucratic hoops as before.

“It clarifies that the cutting of younger conifers out of oak woodlands does not qualify as conversion of timberlands,” she said.

It would also allow the property owners to sell the chipped conifers for use in biomass plants or as firewood.

“AB 1958 is an important step towards giving landowners the tools they need to restore and conserve our region’s incredibly diverse oak woodlands,” North Coast Regional Land Trust Executive Director Mike Cipra said in the release.

Wood has worked locally on this issue with UC Cooperative Extension, the Buckeye Conservancy, the Sanctuary Forest, the Cattlemen’s Association, the Klamath Bird Observatory, the Pacific Birds Habitat Joint Venture, the

Pacific Forest Trust, the Mattole Restoration Council and the Rural County Representatives of California, Ramey said.

“There’s data that shows, especially in our area, that these oak woodlands are disappearing at an alarming rate,” he said.

Ramey noted that this is one of the first times people in the forestry industry, private landowners and environmentalists have come to an agreement over an issue like this.

“People recognize this is a valuable resource and are willing to make sacrifices,” he said.

More information on conifer encroachment can be found online at [ucanr.edu/sites/oak_range/Conifer Encroachment](http://ucanr.edu/sites/oak_range/Conifer_Encroachment).

The bill now faces the state Senate rules committee.

“Our next big hurdle is the Senate natural resource committee in June,” Ramey said.

Should the bill pass through Senate committees and the Senate floor, it could be on the governor’s desk by September, and pending the governor’s signature, go into effect Jan. 1, 2017, Ramey said.

“Oak woodlands are a resource that are going away and if we don’t do something we’re going to lose them,” Ramey said.

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