

October 1, 2016

Bill promotes oak woodlands restoration in Northern California



Conifers continue to encroach upon the oak woodlands and were previously unchecked by the Forest Protection Act, but with last week's passage of AB 1958, there is now initiative to restore the oak woodlands by removing conifers that contributed to their decline. Contributed — Yana Valachovic, University of California Cooperative Extension

By Natalya Estrada

With the passage of AB 1958, the Forest Practice Act was updated to allow for the restoration of Northern California's oak woodlands.

North Coast Assemblyman Jim Wood (D-Healdsburg) said in a statement that under current policies the state was losing historic oak woodlands at an alarming rate.

“This bill will provide a new resource for private landowners to manage their land and preserve these valuable habitats,” Wood said.

The encroachment of conifers is part of the main reason oak woodlands continue to decline along the coast, according to Project Manager Dan Ehresman, of the Northcoast Regional Land Trust.

Ehresman said this law clarifies that oak woodland restoration activities — specifically conifer removal — does not constitute a conversion under the Forest Practice Law and that it created a 7-year pilot exemption to the Timber Harvest Plan process, which allowed for smaller diameter conifer removal, giving land owners the ability to manage the conservation of oak woodlands on their private properties.

“Oak woodlands are so incredibly biodiverse,” Ehresman said. “They have higher levels of biodiversity than virtually any other terrestrial ecosystem in the state supporting over 330 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.”

He added that maintenance of oak woodlands is also economically significant when it comes to ranching activities, open prairies and grasslands.

The Northcoast Regional Land Trust vice president Mike Miles said in the statement that the new legislation advanced California’s Forest Practice Act by recognizing forest diversity.

Mature oak trees are being out-competed eventually killed off by conifers, and the decline in oak woodlands from conifer encroachment is a concern not just in Northern California, but across much of the Pacific Northwest, according to the trust.

While California heads into yet another year of its historic drought, University of California Cooperative Extension Forest Advisor and County Director for Humboldt and Del Norte Yana Valachovic said these trees are naturally fire resistant.

“What’s amazing about oaks is their natural ability to resprout,” Valachovic said. “Their roots don’t die and the burls lives on and they’re able to regenerate. Their bark is also not that flammable depending on the intensity of the fire.”

Valachovic also said that although AB 1958 affects more than just oaks, the removal of conifers around oak woodlands is critical to the landscape of Northern California.

“(They) have long been central to the ecology and culture of northern California,” Valachovic said. “Some say that landowners should accept conifer encroachment because it’s a natural process, but while conifer establishment is natural, it is limited by disturbances like fire.

“Rather than dwell on historical reference conditions and definitions of what’s natural,” she continued, “I would like to focus on the values that we want to maintain on the landscape, and support landowners to actively conserve and promote those values into the future.”

Before the bill's signing, Valachovic said that landowners that used state-approved harvest plans to get rid of conifers also had to replant them, which made it nearly impossible to avoid their encroachment on the oak woodlands. She also said the bill created an exemption that will allow the sale and utilization of conifer biomass and wood removed from the oak woodlands as a byproduct.

"Prior to this bill, a lot of the Forest Protection act was focused on conifers and neglected the historic old growth oaks," Valachovic said. "This is giving some room for other habitat types that exist within the mosaic of forested landscapes to thrive."

Natalya Estrada can be reached at 707-441-0510.