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Conifers are overtaking oak woodlands habitat

California's oak woodlands and mountain grasslands are losing ground to conifers, which means less habitat for woodland creatures and big game.

California Department of Fish and Game Biologist Dave Lancaster said the succession results in a loss of food and shelter for many animals that depend on the habitat, including birds, deer, elk and bears. The increase of conifers, historically maintained by natural fires, is an issue throughout the North Coast and beyond.

"Once they get a good firm hold in the area, it's hard to get any ground back," Lancaster said.

The issue had many in Humboldt County concerned, prompting the Board of Supervisors recently to approve a plan that makes ranchers eligible for a state program — the California Wildlife Conservation Board's California Oak Woodlands Conservation Program — that helps finance projects to conserve oak woodlands in the state. The program is a voluntary,



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors recently approved a plan that makes ranchers eligible for a state program that helps finance projects to conserve oak woodlands, which are being displaced by conifers.

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DAVE LANCASTER
Biologist

incentive-based program.

The management plan, developed by a partnership between the Northcoast Regional Land Trust (NRLT), private landowners and public agencies, included efforts to produce a report on the decline of oak woodlands in the North

Coast. In addition to NRLT, the partnership involves local representatives of agencies that fund conservation work, including the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the California Department of Fish and Game and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. A \$24,870 grant from the county's Headwaters Fund also helped finance the effort.

According to the report, a majority of the oak woodlands are on private land, and about a third of the county's oak woodlands acreage has disappeared since 1850. The report also estimates that at least half the remaining habitat may be lost within the next several decades without intervention.