

The California Chaparral Institute

...the voice of the chaparral



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Major Conservation Groups Support Lawsuit in San Diego County

The California Native Plant Society and San Diego Sierra Club back legal challenge filed by the California Chaparral Institute

SAN DIEGO, *Calif.* – The California Native Plant Society Board of Directors and the San Diego chapter of the Sierra Club have voted to support the California Chaparral Institute’s lawsuit against San Diego County for its failure to follow state law, include public participation, and provide proper scientific oversight in planning a 3-4 year, \$7 million clearing project to remove trees and shrubs in natural areas.

In addition to voting to support the lawsuit, the San Diego Chapter of the California Native Plant Society made a major financial contribution to help cover litigation costs.

Despite strong scientific evidence to the contrary, the County has claimed this habitat clearing project is the best way to reduce fire risk.

“Often using out-of-date information, San Diego County has focused money and effort on removing massive amounts of vegetation – including native plants often far distant from structures,” said Peter St. Clair, Vice President of the San Diego Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. “This is wrong, wasteful, and does not put the money where the risk is: in older homes that have not been retrofitted to be fire-safe. We want the County to continue appropriate vegetation management, but to concentrate far more money and effort on making homes and yards safer through retrofits and properly designed defensible space.”

Background: The San Diego County Board of Supervisors passed a motion on March 23, 2009 that “appropriate environmental CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) review” would be conducted “for any new proposed” vegetation management projects in

the County. However, on May 13, 2009, the Board of Supervisors voted to exempt the project in question from any such review. The project would remove habitat in rural backcountry areas with a specific focus on trees up to 500 feet away from structures and roads.

“We strongly support government assistance for reasonable vegetation management around homes,” said Richard Halsey, Director of the California Chaparral Institute. “But the County’s focus on clearing trees deemed unhealthy nearly two football field lengths away from structures and roads is a waste of taxpayer money.”

Over the past five years, the California Chaparral Institute, California Native Plant Society, the San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum, and others have tried to help San Diego County develop a sufficient fire protection system to protect lives, property, and natural resources from wildfire. While the County has improved its fire-safe building and planning codes for new construction, it has consistently failed to provide adequate funding to create an organized fire protection system.

San Diego County spends less on fire protection than any other county in Southern California, yet it remains one of the most fire prone regions in the United States. To partially make up for this lack of funding the County has depended on federal grants to conduct habitat-clearing projects in an attempt to reduce fire risk in the backcountry on a short-term basis.

The California Chaparral Institute seeks to compel the County to prepare a long-term, comprehensive fire management plan that will include a collaborative process that involves all stakeholders including fire agencies, scientists, conservation organizations, land managers, community groups, and private land owners.

For more details on the lawsuit please visit the California Chaparral Institute Website: <http://www.californiachaparral.org/csdcountyslashburn.html>

The California Chaparral Institute is a non-profit science and education organization dedicated to promoting an understanding and respect for the chaparral ecosystem and helping communities reconnect with the natural environment.