

East Alameda County Conservation Strategy

Community Meeting

Thursday, June 11, 2009; 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Dublin Regional Meeting Room
100 Civic Plaza, Dublin

7 – 7:30 pm: Open House

Meeting Commenced: 7:30 pm

Troy Rahmig from ICF Jones & Stokes, consultant assisting with the preparation of the Conservation Strategy, provided a presentation about the purpose and benefits of the East Alameda County Conservation Strategy, who is involved in its preparation, what has been done to date, and future opportunities for the public to get involved. A copy of the presentation has been posted on the project website at www.eastalco-conservation.org.

Following the presentation, members from the Steering Committee (Steve Stewart, City of Livermore and Liz McElligott, Alameda County), California Department of Fish and Game (Liam Davis), and the User's Advisory Group (Ralph Kanz, Alameda Creek Alliance) provided their perspectives about how the Conservation Strategy would benefit local agencies, regulatory agencies, and other environmental/conservation groups.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Following the presentation and perspectives of participants portion of the East Alameda County Conservation Strategy (EACCS) Community Meeting, there was a public question and answer period. What follows is a general summary of the questions and comments and the responses by members of the Steering Committee.

Steering Committee members present: Liz McElligott, Steve Stewart, Mary Lim, Brian Mathews, Janice Stern, Jim Robins, Karen Sweet, Marcia Grefsrud, Liam Davis, Kim Squires.

Commenter: Lech Naumovich – California Native Plant Society (CNPS)

Mr. Naumovich stated the California Native Plant Society's position that at formal technical advisory committee to review the EACCS to ensure scientific rigor. Noted that rigorous scientific review should be part of any public process and requests that the Steering Committee review the original RFP where the need for a technical review process was requested. Mr. Naumovich asked the Steering Committee if there would be a technical review process and if so when it would occur.

Steve Stewart, City of Livermore, responded that some of that process was started by holding the workshops on species related issues. That was the beginning of coordination with technical experts on some of the issues. Mr. Stewart noted that the local jurisdictions will still have to go through the standard permitting process and intend to have an acceptable level of scientific review at the project-level, just as they do now.

Jim Robins, Alnus Ecological, added that at this point the technical review has been more informal and is focused on small groups that are working through specific issues, rather than a larger technical group reviewing the entire document. Mr. Robins noted that the Steering Committee members want to ensure that the Conservation Strategy as scientifically accurate as possible and as such, are currently

struggling with how best to achieve this with the current budget. Mr. Robins stated that the Steering Committee was open to suggestions as to how to improve the technical review and other technical people to contact.

Commenter: Laura Baker – California Native Plant Society (CNPS)

Ms. Baker stated that the CNPS thinks there are some deficiencies in the public process that is supposed to be part of the preparation of the EACCS. Ms. Baker cited the example of a letter that CNPS submitted to the Steering Committee in February of 2009, which outlined several concerns related to technical issues and process issues. The CNPS never received any acknowledgment of that letter and never received a formal response to that letter. The CNPS expected to hear back directly from the Steering Committee and not from the consultant. Ms. Baker stated that at this point the CNPS does not think the process is transparent enough, and that there is too much distance between the Steering Committee and the User's Advisory Group (UAG).

Kim Squires, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, noted that all of the information that has been released to date, is available on the website. Ms. Squires noted that the Steering Committee is trying to make the process as accessible as possible.

Jim Robins, Alnus Ecological, stated that the Steering Committee knew that ICF Jones & Stokes was dealing with the technical issues raised in the letter from CNPS, but that Ms. Baker was correct that CNPS did deserve a formal response to the letter that they submitted.

Commenter: Rich Fletcher – Fletcher Conservation Properties

Mr. Fletcher asked how the EACCS would outline how conservation should occur on private lands. He noted that it is private landowners that own the habitat that we are talking about, so making it easy for private landowners to protect their land as habitat was important.

Karen Sweet, Alameda County Resource Conservation District, replied that the complete toolbox hasn't been fully designed yet, but that would be an important part of the final strategy and will be the focus of discussions in the next several months.

Commenter: Darrel Sweet – Landowner

Mr. Sweet was concerned with some of the discussions at one of the technical workshops, where the proposal was made to only preserve 50% of the grasslands in Alameda County. He thinks we should preserve as much as we can, and not be too restrictive in the Strategy. He is concerned that this Conservation Strategy will focus too much on the rare habitats and ultimately result in protecting a bunch of little postage stamps rather than conserving large expanses of grassland. He is also concerned that too much focus is being placed on threatened and endangered species but that the process should also focus on keeping common species common.

Liam Davis, California Department of Fish and Game, agreed that preservation of grasslands was an important part of any conservation strategy in northern California. Based on some of his previous work he appreciates the contribution that the ranching community has made to the conservation of grasslands in California and would like to see that continue as the result of this Conservation Strategy.

Liz McElligott, Alameda County, noted that while we can set conservation goals for the study area, in reality there will only be so many mitigation dollars available for conservation efforts. For that reason we need to prioritize and make sure that mitigation dollars are being used for the best habitats available. Additional conservation efforts will need to be undertaken by other conservation groups.

Brian Mathews, Alameda County Waste Management Authority, added that we should all keep in mind, that while we are setting conservation goals for the study area, there are already some pretty restrictive ordinances in place to help protect natural lands in the county. Mr. Mathews also stated that while we recognize that it would be nice to protect everything that is left, we also need to prioritize conservation to ensure habitats for threatened species are retained.

Commenter: Dick Quigley – Citizen

Mr. Quigley noted that one of the biggest issues in grasslands in Alameda County is fire suppression and public safety as it is related to fires, and that those things should be considered as part of grassland conservation.

Mr. Quigley also stated that the Tri-Valley currently imports 80% of its water from the Delta, through Bethany Reservoir. He questioned how much impact that has on the biological resources that we are assessing as part of this plan? How much effect does it have on our Arroyos and Reservoirs and the related recharging of aquifers that result from importing water? He noted that in 1962, when the South Bay Aqueduct was built, we altered the Tri-valley's stream regime forever. Mr. Quigley thinks it is important to include that information in the background of this document.

Commenter: Rich Fletcher – Fletcher Conservation Properties

Mr. Fletcher noted that a secondary effect of identifying mitigation opportunities is that a new value is put on habitat in the county. He thinks this is a big asset of having a conservation plan. It could encourage landowners to convert their land to habitat, and since there will be a value attached to that, it could be considered the highest and best use of the land.

Commenter: Becky Dennis - Citizen

Commenter wanted to know if the Steering Committee meetings are noticed on the website so that the public can attend and if the meeting minutes from these meetings are posted.

Kim Squires, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service noted that the Steering Committee meetings are not open to the public.

Brian Mathews, Alameda County Waste Management Authority, replied that the purpose of the Steering Committee meetings is to administer the consultant contract and to guide the process.

Janice Stern, City of Pleasanton, stated that the Steering Committee meeting was basically a staff meeting, since the participants are all staff, and are not elected officials. The Steering Committee does not vote on anything.

Jim Robins, Alnus Ecological, agreed that the Steering Committee meetings were to oversee the contract, but wondered if the Steering Committee meeting minutes could be posted on the website. This will be discussed at the next Steering Committee meeting.

It was clarified by several members of the Steering Committee, that the User's Advisory Group is meant to be the public side of this process and that the User's Advisory Group can put things on the Steering Committee agenda for consideration. In addition, it was requested that at the User's Advisory Group meetings that there be an agenda item to debrief the group of what the Steering Committee discussed at its last meeting and responses to User's Advisory Group questions and concerns.

Meeting Adjourned: 9:08 pm