

DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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Board of Supervisors Agenda Item – March 9, 2010

Development Services Department recommending the Board of Supervisors approve key term definitions for use in preparing Phase I of the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan.

Recommendation:

Approve the use of the following definitions for preparing the INRMP:

Native vegetation

An assemblage of plants in a specific place or region that is self-perpetuating and has adapted to environmental and biological conditions. Native vegetation is dominated by native plant species but may include non-native plants or naturalized plants. Vegetation may be classified by type based on characteristics such as dominant plant communities or dominant plant species. Some native vegetation assemblages may contain significant numbers of introduced plant species that have adapted to local conditions.

Important habitat

For the purpose of General Plan Policy 7.4.2.8, Important Habitat is defined as habitats that support important flora and fauna, including deer winter, summer and fawning ranges and migration routes; stream, river and lakeshore habitat; fish spawning areas; seeps springs and wetlands; oak woodlands; large expanses of native vegetation; and other unique plant, fish and wildlife habitats. Degree or extent of importance will vary depending on proximity of connectivity to other areas of same or similar habitat that support the same flora and fauna. Higher density of such habitats will have greater conservation value than those isolated from same or similar habitats.

Large expanse

The amount of less disturbed, contiguous habitat needed for both narrowly occurring and wide-ranging species or to maintain natural processes, where the extent of land needed depends on the species or natural process.

Background:

This document summarizes the results of four meetings (January 7, 12, and February 4, 2010) of the Plant and Wildlife Technical Advisory Committee (PAWTAC) and the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan Stakeholders Committee (ISAC) with Sierra Ecosystem Associates (SEA). The task at these meetings was to define three terms used in General Plan Policy 7.4.2.8., Important Habitat, Large Expanses, and Native Vegetation and as required in the scope of work for the INRMP contract (subtask 1.a.) The definitions presented here recognize the input from both committees and are also scientifically sound and consistent with the 2004 General Plan.

These definitions provide a base for the subsequent steps of Phase I of the INRMP process, including updating the Existing INRMP Initial Inventory Map (Subtask 1.b.) The definitions reflect the best collective thinking on this topic at this time. As the mapping work proceeds, the definitions may need to be refined to ensure that they reflect the intent of the Board of Supervisors in the development of the INRMP.

Two attachments to this memo were provided to the PAWTAC and ISAC for review in advance of the meetings. Attachment A, titled, “Key Term Definitions” summarizes the use of the key terms in the 2004 General Plan, the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) and in various scientific resources. This document provided background information and a starting point for the discussions of the key terms. Attachment B, titled, “Summary of Use of Key Terms in DEIR Chapter 5 Section 12,” is a presentation on how the key terms were used in the DEIR. Both advisory committees had previously requested to see the context in which these terms had been used in documents supporting the General Plan. This document was provided to the committees for that purpose.

Because the ISAC could not reach a majority recommendation on two of the three terms, the Committee requested that the draft minutes of the last two ISAC meetings be attached (Attachments C and D) so that the Board has an understanding of the discussion that took place.

Native Vegetation

PAWTAC Recommendation

An assemblage of plants in a specific place or region that has adapted to environmental and biological conditions. Native vegetation is typically dominated by native plant species but may include non-native plants or naturalized plants. Vegetation may be classified by type based on characteristics such as dominant plant communities or dominant plant species. Some native vegetation assemblages, such as annual grassland, may contain significant numbers of introduced plant species that have adapted to local conditions. For the purposes of the INRMP process, “native vegetation” and “natural vegetation” can be used synonymously.

ISAC Recommendation

An assemblage of plants in a specific place or region that is self-perpetuating and has adapted to environmental and biological conditions. Native vegetation is dominated by native plant species but may include non-native plants or naturalized plants. Vegetation may be classified by type based on characteristics such as dominant plant communities or dominant plant species. Some native vegetation assemblages may contain significant numbers of introduced plant species that have adapted to local conditions.

The proposed definition is based largely on a combination of definitions from the scientific literature. The final sentence in the definition recommended by the PAWTAC, “For the purposes of the INRMP process, 'native vegetation' and 'natural vegetation' can be used synonymously,” reflects a goal identified by both committees at the January 2010 meetings that the definition reflect the context in which the term “native vegetation” was used in the DEIR and the 2004 General Plan. From the review of the supporting documents for the 2004 General Plan, it appears that the authors used the two terms, “native” and “natural” vegetation interchangeably throughout the document, including when describing the existing conditions in the County, the habitat types, the environmental impacts and the mitigation measures (Please refer to Attachment 2 and Chapter 5.12 of the DEIR.)

The phrase, “self-perpetuating,” included in the definition approved by the ISAC, is a component of the definition of “natural communities,” found in the 2004 General Plan. The complete definition for natural communities, from the General Plan Glossary, is: “A general term for an assemblage of naturally-occurring plants and animals coexisting together in a common area that is relatively undisturbed and unfragmented and that is self-perpetuating. These communities are generally comprised of a variety of plant and animal species that have evolved together over time in a specific location or region as a result of complex interactions among climate, soils, hydrology, topography, fire, vegetation, wildlife, and human.” Both advisory committees discussed the term “natural communities” and both declined to make it synonymous with “native vegetation.” The phrase “self-perpetuating” was not found associated with “native vegetation” in the scientific or other literature which was reviewed. Although SEA believes the words “self-perpetuating” would be appropriate to support the definition for “natural communities,” which is used in the General Plan when discussing Objective 7.4.1, Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species, staff finds that the term refines the definition and clarifies the relationship of introduced plants in the native vegetation.

In summary, staff recommends the Board accept the definition approved by ISAC. Although the General Plan and its EIR used the terms “native vegetation” and “natural vegetation” interchangeably, consistency in the use of terms will assist in adopting and implementing the INRMP. The recommended definition is also scientifically supportable and consistent with the EIR and General Plan.

Important Habitat

PAWTAC Recommendation

For the purpose of General Plan Policy 7.4.2.8, Important Habitat is defined as habitats that support important flora and fauna, including deer winter, summer and fawning ranges and migration routes; stream, river and lakeshore habitat; fish spawning areas; seeps springs and wetlands; oak woodlands; large expanses of native vegetation; and other unique plant, fish and wildlife habitats. Degree or extent of importance will vary depending on proximity of connectivity to other areas of same or similar habitat that support the same flora and fauna. Higher density of such habitats will have greater conservation value than those isolated from same or similar habitats.

ISAC Recommendation – ISAC was unable to make a recommendation.

The basis for the definition comes directly from the DEIR. On page 5.12-45, the DEIR states: “Important Habitat is defined as habitats that support important flora and fauna, including deer winter, summer and fawning ranges and migration routes; stream, river and lakeshore habitat; fish spawning areas; seeps springs and wetlands; oak woodlands; large expanses of native vegetation; and other unique plant, fish and wildlife habitats.” During discussions in both advisory committees, there was concern and interest regarding the need to differentiate the definitions of “important habitat” requirements for General Plan Objective 7.4.1 (Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species) and requirements for Policy 7.4.2.8 (Developing and implementing an INRMP). The PAWTAC suggested the first statement, “For the purposes of General Plan Policy 7.4.2.8...” as clarification. Staff and SEA agree that this additional statement clarifies for the County that the requirements for important habitat as it relates to the INRMP are not intended to apply to the requirements for Objective 7.4.1 for important, or critical, habitat for special status species.

The final two sentences of the proposed definition read: “Degree or extent of importance will vary depending on proximity of connectivity to other areas of same or similar habitat that support the same flora and fauna. Higher density of such habitats will have greater conservation

value than those isolated from same or similar habitats.” These statements underscore the importance of identifying connectivity of habitats from both a scientific standpoint and from the standpoint of meeting Objective 7.4.2 (Identify and Protect Resources) of the 2004 General Plan.

There was some discussion by both advisory committees about the habitats listed in the proposed definition, but neither group reached consensus to limit the list. Additional comments on this definition as well as the other terms are provided by individual committee members in Attachments E through G. Staff recommends that the Board approve the language proposed, which is basically from the DEIR, in order to maintain consistency with the General Plan.

Large Expanses

PAWTAC Recommendation

The amount of less disturbed, contiguous habitat needed for both narrowly occurring and wide-ranging species or to maintain natural processes, where the extent of land needed depends on the species or natural process.

ISAC Recommendation – ISAC was unable to make a recommendation.

There is no formal definition of the term “large expanses” in the scientific literature. However, it is known that some plants and animals are more sensitive to landscape and habitat fragmentation than are others. The proposed definition allows the necessary flexibility to apply the definition to a broad range of plant and animal species that may come under consideration in both Phase I and Phase II of the INRMP process. PAWTAC unanimously recommended this definition.