California's First “Native Plant Week”

CNPS chapters, schools, government, businesses, and other groups encouraged to participate

By Mike Ross

As California native plant enthusiasts, we’re used to celebrating year-round the beauty, diversity, and unique benefits of our native flora. Come the third week of April, however, we’re going to ask all Californians to join us—with the encouragement of the California State Assembly and Senate, no less.

Beginning in 2011, the third week of April will be known officially as “California Native Plant Week,” according to an Assembly Concurrent Resolution (ACR 173) passed on August 2, 2010 by the State Assembly and on August 27, 2010 by the State Senate.

The first California Native Plant Week (CNPW) will be officially celebrated April 17-23, 2011, although events are expected to encompass both weekends (April 16-24).

The CNPS-sponsored resolution was introduced by Assemblywoman Noreen Evans (D-Napa), who has supported issues related to California’s native plants in the past. It attracted bipartisan support from 48 additional Democratic and Republican cosponsors, as well as the approval of horticulturists, conservation organizations, and nurseries from throughout California.

By pleasant coincidence, Ms. Evans’s birthday (April 22, which is also celebrated as Earth Day) will fall within California Native Plant Week during most years.

ACR 173 recognizes the vital historical, artistic, and economic contributions that California’s native plants have made to our state, and points out that California native plant gardening and landscaping (continued on page 3)

San Diego’s Fuel Treatment Strategy is Harming Ecosystem

Policymakers attempting to circumvent environmental regulations

By Richard Halsey and Carrie Schneider

[Editor’s Note: The next issue of Fremontia will focus on issues related to native plants and fire safety.]

An increasingly familiar and unfortunate response to California’s wildfires has been to blame native plant communities rather than focusing on what matters most: retrofitting flammable structures, removing flammable ornamental vegetation, and creating appropriate defensible space by thinning rather than “clearing” native habitat.

In a draft community wildfire protection plan issued in 2010, a citizen group in Monterey County excluded local conservationists and scientific input and equated “clearing brush” to a constitutional right. The plan erroneously refers to native shrublands as “over-mature” and “overgrown” fire threats. In Santa Barbara County, federal funds are being spent to clear-cut large expanses of native chaparral to create what a local fire safe council member has described as a park-like setting. Despite denials, what is actually left behind are fields of invasive, (continued on page 6)
Fuel Treatment  (from page 1)

flamable weeds interrupted by an occasional manzanita or scrub oak damaged by the loss of the surrounding watershed.

earlier this year. The judge made it clear that the use of the emergency exception clause for a four-year fuel treatment project was illegal and that the county needed to go back and follow the law.

The county responded to the judgment by issuing a negative declaration, a CEQA project document that allows development projects to proceed if they will not cause any significant environmental impacts. Ironically, by filing the original emergency exemption, the county had already recognized there would indeed be significant impacts.

At the same time the negative declaration was issued, the county sponsored a bill in the California State Senate that would have exempted future fuel treatment projects from environmental review and citizen oversight. Fortunately, due to the efforts of many dedicated conservationists, the bill died in committee. At press time, the County is still in the process of responding to comments on the negative declaration. The County’s final decision will determine whether or not the court battle will continue.

Unfortunately, the possibility of a reasonable compromise is not promising. Despite more than seven years of work by local conservationists and the recent legal decision, San Diego County has made it clear in a recent newspaper editorial that it intends to continue its efforts to circumvent environmental protections in order to clear the natural landscape of what it sees only as dangerous fuel.

In addition, the county has lobbied the state to ignore global climate change in its development of future fire plans, and has continually claimed that the conversion of native shrublands to nonnative grasslands is not a problem. The county’s rationale for these viewpoints is that taking such problems into consideration would interfere with its plans to conduct major fuel treatments in the backcountry.

For an illustration of what vegetation removal can do to chaparral, view a before and after comparison at www.californiachaparral.com/threatsochaparral.html. The fall 2007 cover of Fremontia shows a mature stand of manzanita, subsequently cleared in an attempt to “reduce fuel.” The results of this treatment turned an unbroken old-growth chaparral shrubland into a parched hillside.

Local CNPS chapters must become familiar with CEQA and fire science to protect California’s priceless native habitats from unreasonable land management projects that are claimed to be necessary to reduce fire risk. Although vegetation management is a critical tool in our efforts to protect lives, property, and natural resources, it needs to be conducted according to sound scientific principles, and not based on panic.

To learn more about this story, please visit the SD County Slash and Burn page at www.californiachaparral.org.

Richard Halsey is director of the California Chaparral Institute. Carrie Schneider is conservation coordinator with the San Diego Chapter of CNPS.