

# Lively debate sprouts over measure to

## save valley oak trees

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**SANTA ROSA** — Sonoma County moved closer to adopting an ordinance that would protect indigenous valley oak trees last Thursday, when the proposal was handed to the board of supervisors for a final decision.

The proposed ordinance, a topic of debate between farmers and concerned citizens for over two years, would detail a "Valley Oak Habitat" (VOH) area within the county in which the cutting down, altering or removing of the giant oaks would be prohibited without a permit for trees wider than nine inches in diameter.

Farmers feel that the ordinance does not consider their economic well-being.

Those in favor of the ordinance feel that the trees are a vital ecological and historical resource whose population has been depleted to a drastic level in the county over the past century.

During a public forum last week citizens representing both sides of the valley oak controversy seemed willing to work together, according to Sigrid Swedenborg, a planner with the permit and resource management department.

"There was a good discussion on working together to develop a compromise," she said, "Everybody that spoke understood the value of the trees."

Valley oak trees that have been adversely impacted by urban growth throughout Sonoma County this century are not regenerating at a pace that would ensure the survival of the species, said Swedenborg. Although older valley oaks are more common, younger trees are not.

"They're not producing in areas where they once occurred or are occurring now," said Rocky Thompson, restoration planner for Circuit Riders, a Windsor non-profit agency that works on preserving natural habitats.

"In many areas all we see are the older individuals — the ones that are not going to be around in another 100 years or so," said Thompson.

During last Thursday's meeting, talk of a possible incentive program for farmers was circulated, although no plans were made. The idea of an incentive program was supported by at least one member of the farm bureau, said Swedenborg.

However, Sonoma County Farm Bureau President John Bucher said he hoped for a total reprieve for farmers, calling for an "agricultural exemption."

"The requirements seem exces-



**MIGHTY OAK** — Valley oak trees, such as this one adjacent to Highway 12 east of Sebastopol in the Laguna de Santa Rosa, would be protected under a proposed county ordinance. Some farmers think the ordinance is too strict, but proponents claim the trees are vital to the county's natural habitat.

Bucher, stating that farmers are subject to more stringent regulations than land developers even though urban development has been named the culprit in the trees' population decline.

"I'm not trying to pit farmers against developers, but we should at least have the same rules," he said. "Those in agriculture are feeling defensive because development has been able to go on ... and we'll be forced to carry the burden."

Bucher also felt that the concerns of farmers have not been taken into consideration, especially when weighing the ordinance's affect on farming versus the vitality of the valley oak species.

"The commissioners said they wanted to support agriculture, yet they wouldn't take a stand," said Bucher. "The species is not endangered, it grows vigorously ... we're having a tough time

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understanding why this thing is dragging."

In its current form, the ordinance would protect the remaining population of oaks by imposing steep fines on offenders. These indigenous survivors of ancient forests could be permissionably removed only in situations where they were considered dangerous or a nuisance and

landowners would still be charged a fee for tree removal. The ordinance also ensures that if trees are removed, saplings be planted to compensate for the loss.

Instead of bolstering support for the valley oak population, Bucher believed the ordinance will hinder public interest because of the rules governing ownership.

"These trees are going to be looked upon as a liability and not an asset," he said.

The VOH locations are determined by soil types which best

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suit the trees. Currently, the proposal would affect 15 percent of the Alexander and Dry Creek valleys and sections of the Santa Rosa plain where soil conditions are optimum for the valley oaks.

The largest majority of Valley Oaks are located in the northern Sonoma Valley area, said Swedenborg.

"They're one of Sonoma County's most important oak species," said Thompson.

He explained that because of their large mass, adult trees can grow to be 100 feet tall and wide, they are invaluable to the county's wildlife habitat.

"They provide nesting sites for a lot of different animals," he said. "This historically significant species has major impact on local landscape. It's growth and function can't be replaced by any other tree, nothing compares to

serve the small percentage that's left over."

Circuit Rider productions has undertaken a valley oak restoration project and have planted several thousand valley oak seedlings in the Laguna area. Thompson said the young trees are growing well.

it."According to Thompson, the trees value are not only vital and aesthetic, but are a part of Sonoma County's heritage.

"(The tree) helps us define what is Sonoma County and recognizing that this was once a really important feature of our landscape and it's important to pre-