

Residents plea for oak trees

Decision: Board says preservation a high priority.

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VISALIA — Oak trees county-wide could experience more government help in the coming years.

Tulare County Board of Supervisors members, at their regular Tuesday meeting, assured protectionists they would make drafting and implementing a plan to provide government protection of the area's woodlands a top priority.

But not just yet.

Aside from providing several environmental benefits, oaks have a rich local history. Creating a plan to protect them, however, will take a significant amount of government staff time and money, supervisors cautioned.

"We are not asking [county officials] to reinvent the wheel," Springville resident Terry Manning said. "There are 19 other counties who already have plans."

Supervisors listened to a report from the Resource Management Agency about oak trees in the area. The report came after years of resident, rancher and environmentalist concern that something be done about the 300,000 acres in Tulare County. Thirty thousand of those acres are projected to be developed by 2040.

It was an unofficial declaration that yielded no clear plans or time line. It also comes eight years after the state's establishment of the Oak Woodland Conservation Program, which allots \$10 million annually to local jurisdictions to protect and better their oak woodlands. In order to participate in the program, a county or a city must adopt an Oak Woodlands Management Plan.

"I'd like to see us devote the time to making a quality plan we could use for years to come," Board Chairman Phillip Cox, Dist. 3, said.

The plan is not required to be a part of the General Plan. Resource Management employees, however, would be responsible for coming up with a plan. Their hands are currently tied with finishing an updated General Plan, which they aim to finish by the end of the calendar year, county officials said.

"The General Plan is important to the entire county ... it's huge," Supervisor Steve Worthley, Dist. 4, said. "Once that's done we can take this issue and implement it."

An Oak Woodlands Conversation plan would be voluntary for land owners, who in return for protecting and bettering their woodlands, would receive incentives.

Two thirds of Tulare County's oak woodlands are located on private property.

Residents from Three Rivers and Springville, as well as representatives from various organizations such as Tulare County for Responsible Growth, the California Native Plants Society and Sequoia Riverlands Trust, presented letters and spoke during Tuesday's meeting in favor of quickly establishing a plan.

"I'm a native Visalian and we love our trees," said Alan George, farm adviser emeritus to the University of California.

George and others have been measuring oak trees in the area for more than 30 years. They recently found the biggest one yet, 25 feet in circumference located on the edge of Visalia.

Visalia was chosen to be the county's seat in an election that took place in 1852 under an oak tree.

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