



**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY GROUP**

**of the Ventana Chapter**

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Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors  
701 Ocean Street  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

June 22, 2024

Agenda Item: 14

Date of Hearing: June 25, 2024

Re: Low-Impact Camping Area (LICA) Ordinance

Chair Cummings and Members of the Board,

The Sierra Club is writing to share our concerns regarding the County's proposed Low Impact Camping Area ordinance (LICA). A CEQA exemption is not appropriate for this proposed Ordinance. Beyond the safety and accessibility issues presented by the ordinance, there are clear and potentially significant environmental impacts resulting from the adoption of such an ordinance. The Sierra Club recommends that your Board not approve the Ordinance as currently proposed, and also that proper CEQA review be performed.

The Staff Report recommends to your Board that you find this Ordinance exempt under CEQA Section 15061(b)(3).<sup>1</sup> There is no way to justify this proposed exemption. This exemption would apply only when it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility having a significant effect on the environment. Yet the record is replete with evidence that there is a possibility (if not a certainty) that there will be significant effects on the environment. Not only has this been shown through public testimony and public submittals, the County's own Planning Commissioners have raised these concerns. The present Staff Report documents the recommendations made by the County's own Planning Commissioners to address these concerns.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the basis for the staff recommendation to find this Ordinance exempt is contradicted by the County's own process, and record, to date.

The Ordinance's approach of reviewing each proposed site singly as applications are reviewed does nothing to remedy the CEQA deficiency. Even if an exemption were to be made (which it should not), there would be an exception to the exemption under 15300.2 as single site review would not take into account the cumulative impact of successive projects.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cal. Code Title 14 § 15061(b)(3): "Where it can be seen with **certainty** that there is **no possibility** that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, the activity is not subject to CEQA." In pertinent part, emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Staff Report, Agenda Packet pages 124-126.

<sup>3</sup> Cal. Code Title 14 § 15300.2.(b): "Cumulative Impact. All exemptions for these classes are **inapplicable** when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant." Emphasis added.

The County Staff Report does not adequately reflect the level of possible disturbance to wildlife and biotic resources in the proposed area. The contention that opening these rural parcels to year-round camping, in areas already underserved by County personnel and with limited oversight and enforcement of fire and sanitation requirements, will not cause environmental harm is unsupported. Precisely *because* the LICA ordinance applies to parcels beyond the Urban and Rural Services Line, these campsites will tend to be in the County's most remote areas, and are likely to hold both more sensitive ecosystems and a higher number of wild species of both flora and fauna, putting campers directly into habitat which currently is mostly not subject to higher levels of noise, traffic, or human activity in general. We appreciate that the ordinance has specific requirements around sanitation, but because these campgrounds are not intensively managed or overseen, there is potential for inadequate disposal of waste and the subsequent pollution of local waterways and watershed lands, which are an important part of Santa Cruz County's entirely self-sustaining water resources.

The Sierra Club notes that, although low impact camping areas must “conform to all requirements of the appropriate fire district, state law, and County Fire Code per SCC Chapter 7.92”, fire pits and outdoor cooking areas are permitted. Almost all of the potential LICA parcels are in high or very high fire hazard zones, mostly in mountainous, steep, and difficult to access areas, many of which went through the CZU Lightning Complex Fire of 2020. Climate change has worsened these fire hazard conditions. Due to the difficulty of access, any wildfire sparked in these zones can take off very quickly before firefighters can reach the area. Residents are highly aware of the risks of wildfire; however, temporary visitors may not be as aware of the danger posed or the safeguards required. **We strongly urge the Board to make any LICA camping ‘cold camping’ only, with no open fire permitted.**

Under the proposed ordinance, property owners are able to apply for permits to rent campsites on parcels of 5 acres or larger outside the Urban and Rural Services Line. We understand that only one LICA per parcel would be permitted; however, each LICA could host up to 9 campsites with 4 paying campers per night, for a total of 36 possible per night, across nearly 1,300 eligible parcels on almost 20,000 acres in the county. This is not an insignificant number of potential campsites, and places an increased burden of enforcement and oversight on the County personnel and volunteer fire departments which serve the San Lorenzo Valley and Bonny Doon areas.

The draft ordinance contains safety provisions such as a site manager reachable 24 hours a day by telephone; however, given the extreme unreliability of cell phone reception in the areas, any such provision is rendered largely pointless. Requiring an on-site manager or owner to be present would address some of these concerns, as would a requirement that any LICA site be served by a landline rather than cell only phone service (as recommended by the Santa Cruz County Planning Commission in their list of concerns), and we urge the County to consider changing the ordinance language to reflect that.

The Sierra Club appreciates the opportunity to comment on this proposed ordinance. Thank you for considering our concerns.

Sincerely,

Michael Guth, Chair  
Santa Cruz Group of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club