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Blue Oak Group



Butte, Glenn, Lassen, Plumas & Tehama Counties

Three of the articles in this newsletter were written by three of the candidates for the 2024 Chico City Council election: Katie Hawley, Bryce Goldstein and Monica McDaniel. Please take time to read these articles. Do some homework to find out about all of the candidates up for election this fall - what they believe in and stand for. Then be sure to vote.

Imagining a Livable Future: Have We Already Seen It?

By Katie Hawley

Katie is a California Climate Action Corps Fellow at Butte Environmental Council

Katie is running for Chico City Council in District 5.

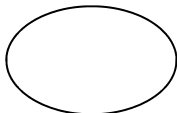
In the summer of 2022, I sat atop Mt. Lassen and concluded that the burn scar left by the Dixie Fire undoubtedly hailed as the most striking visual feature. With a pair of binoculars, I tried to locate the edge of the burn. Stretches of charred land continued past the horizon in multiple directions. Scorched snags stuck out from the ground like toothpicks. No news articles could encapsulate the scope of California's largest and most expensive fire². I was filled with a burst of hopelessness while imagining Northern California's future as the climate continues to warm.

(continued on p. 2)

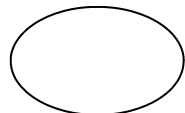
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Imagining a Livable Future *(continued from p. 1)*



Katie Hawley

This summer, I was led through the same burn scar I had observed from the peak 2 years prior by a Lassen National Park forester. The forester called it “The Devastated Area”, where thick fuel buildup produced a fire so hot and so intense that nearly every tree in the area had died. Now, the presence of life was surprisingly abundant. The landscape was scattered with paintbrush flowers and lupins of all colors. Native bees and butterflies danced from flower to flower. Quaking Aspen seedlings cupped sunlight with their round leaves, grateful to see the sky after being choked out by conifers during 100+ years of fire suppression. The moisture-filled Quaking Aspen regenerated prolifically following the Dixie Fire, as its seeds depend on fire to germinate⁴. In a managed forest, our tour guide explained,

low-intensity flames naturally thin conifer tree canopy, letting the sun-loving aspen species enjoy pieces of open sky. Our tour guide led us from the Devastated area to an area managed with tree thinning, fuels reduction, and prescribed burning. The Dixie Fire moved through this portion of the forest as well, but the management allowed many old-growth trees to recover.

After a disaster, nature mourns with us. The air is still. The birds are quiet. We are in the midst of a strange world consumed by climate trauma, and humans are not the only ones who recognize it. Beavers, songbirds, and moose are moving further north due to heat stress³. Some species, like pikas, are dispersal-limited and cannot migrate quickly enough to out-pace the warming temperatures in the South⁵. Other flora and fauna that have uniquely limited habitats cannot migrate because their habitats are physically blockaded by development projects⁷. Species unable to adapt to climate change will disappear. The sixth mass-extinction is drawing near, as extinction rates are 35 times higher than the million years prior to human impacts to the environment⁶. Large-scale disruption to the “tree of life” will continue to have painful consequences, including the increasing frequency and severity of wildfire in Northern California. Although global warming will not ease in our lifetimes, our final destination has endless possibilities. If human environmental practices drastically improve, new species will emerge to replace lost species, and existing species will be able to adapt easier. This phenomenon can be observed on a micro-level in Butte County.

(concluded on p. 3)

Newsletter Information

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For submissions, comments, or inquiries, contact: Suzette Welch, booksontape@rocketmail.com 530 570-3240. Please include name, phone number, and address with each submission. Short, single-topic articles are preferred. Deadlines for proposed articles and letters to the editor: February 1, May 1, August 1, and November 1.

Blue Oak Group News reserves the right to edit all submissions for reasons of space, clarity and potential libel. The opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Sierra Club or the Blue Oak Group.

Imagining a Livable Future *(concluded from p. 2)*

After the Camp Fire swept through Butte Creek Ecological Preserve, a moderate increase of birds and bird diversity was observed¹. Woodpeckers flourish with a new availability of snag habitat, and the threatened Willow Flycatcher lives in above-average numbers¹. Post-fire brush growth brings an increase in grazing species that are eager to taste the nutrient-dense sprouts after the first rain⁸. **The resiliency, and at times, absurdity of nature's ability to adapt to climate adversity** should lead us to the logical conclusion that **it is not too late to solve the climate crisis**. A favorite author of mine, Naomi Klein, states in a Guardian article that "climate change represents a historic opportunity" to solve a plethora of societal issues as climate justice is addressed⁹. The tremendous loss brought by the climate crisis cannot be overlooked, but neither can the opportunities for new structures.

Footnotes:

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8. Westlake, Shannon et. al. (2019). "The magnet effect of fire on herbivores affects plant community structure in a forested system." Forest Ecology and Management Vol. 458. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378112719318821?via%3Dihub>
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The City of Chico Council is comprised of seven members each elected by district. The upcoming November 5, 2024, Election will be for the selection of four (4) members of the City Council to serve four-year terms of office in Districts 1, 3, 5, and 7.

Balancing Environmentalism, Climate Chaos, and the Housing Crisis

By Bryce Goldstein

Bryce Goldstein is a Transportation Planner, City of Chico Climate Action Commissioner, former Planning Commissioner, former Butte Environmental Council Board Member, and a lifelong resident of Northern California. She holds a B.S. in Environmental Science: Energy & Climate from Humboldt State University (Cal Poly Humboldt). Bryce is running for Chico City Council in District 7.



Bryce Goldstein

Chico residents successfully fought and overturned the environmentally-destructive Valley's Edge sprawl development this year. I am proud to have been a part of this movement. I'm grateful to see a simultaneous shift toward recognizing and fighting for smart growth and the types of housing that benefit both our community and our climate. In the wake of the Park Fire, Camp Fire, and other disastrous wildfires exacerbated by climate change, it is imperative that communities like Chico plan proactively for a resilient future and a lot of new neighbors.

Living in a location relatively safe from the immediate effects from climate change is somewhat of a luxury. Low-income families unable to afford skyrocketing housing prices have for decades moved inland to lower-cost communities in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) like Paradise, with high wildfire risk and dependence on greenhouse-gas-intensive commuting. The 2018 Camp Fire destroyed nearly 20,000 homes in Paradise and other communities, leaving many immediately homeless and creating secondary effects in neighboring Chico of price gouging, evictions, and more homelessness. Chico has continued struggling to keep up with the demand for permanent housing for low and moderate income residents displaced by fires, while rebuilding on the ridge has become cost-prohibitive for many.

We successfully prevented an unaffordable, sprawling, car-dependent development in the WUI, in an area that burned in previous fires. That's a huge step in the right direction for resilience, but we still need to build more housing for lower-income families in Chico to catch up with demand and to prepare for future displacement. To meet our housing needs while protecting our environment, we need to plan for smart growth. Smart growth is a planning strategy that focuses growth in compact walkable areas to avoid sprawl.

Smart growth shifts the current development paradigm away from automobile-dependent, greenhouse gas intensive sprawl and back towards traditional neighborhoods that are walkable, beautiful, human-scaled, and thriving. Smart growth looks like abundant housing on the same block as a grocery store, and children being able to walk and bike safely to school. Smart growth involves reusing and redeveloping infill sites to build transit-oriented mixed-use housing including shophouses, ADUs, townhouses, apartments, and small houses. In Chico, this looks like redeveloping vacant lots into four-plexes or cottage courts, and turning car sales lots on corridors like Park Avenue into thriving mixed-use housing above coffee shops and restaurants, connected by safe streets and buses. With more people living along transit corridors and taking the bus, we can have more frequent bus service, fewer people driving cars, and less greenhouse gas emissions.

Of course, there are barriers. It is illegal to build more than two houses on most lots in Chico, and lots zoned for higher density are scarce enough to have a high cost that only major developers can afford. Additionally, our society has been built around the automobile for so long that parking is a mandatory part of development. Parking mandates can make it physically impossible to fit enough parking onto a lot that theoretically allows for multiple homes or a mixed-use development. We need to reduce parking mandates and upzone strategically to allow for more, smaller homes that are naturally more affordable and use less energy.

The issues of environmentalism, housing, planning, homelessness, social justice, and climate change are becoming increasingly inseparable, and must be addressed together. Our leaders have a responsibility to ensure our communities are resilient to the impacts of climate change, and to allow and encourage the creation of sustainable infill housing for everybody who lives here and who will need to live here in the future.

We Need To Prioritize Our Greenways

By *Monica McDaniel*

Monica has for 15 years served the city of Chico on many boards and commissions. Currently she is Chair of the Chico Arts Commission and a member of the Police Community Advisory Board. Monica is running for Chico City Council in District 3.



Monica McDaniel

When I was just out of high school I got a chance to canvass for the Sierra Club. We were going door to door educating people about wetlands and watersheds, seeking donations to save them. At that time, I never would have dreamed that I would be getting the chance to be writing about beautiful Bidwell Park now, as a city council candidate!

When I was a kid, my father used to take me with him to the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Gardens, at the Claremont Colleges. It was kind of our church. When I moved to Chico, 30 years ago, and discovered the wonders of Bidwell park, with its many trails, Blue Oaks, Valley Oaks, and even Poison Oaks, it seemed more like a natural cathedral, in comparison to the gardens I grew up hiking in with my father. So the day that our community got the alert that Upper Park was on fire, was heartbreaking, and frightening for many of us.

At the time of writing this piece, the Park Fire continues to burn; over 400,000 acres along with 567 structures. It has been confirmed that prior to the start of the Park Fire, the City of Chico had identified prescribed burn projects around Upper Bidwell Park. The prescribed burns happened around the entrance of the park, but were pushed off until Spring for the areas of the park around Alligator Hole, where the fire started.

The Sacramento Bee reports that experts say that prescribed burns could have possibly stopped or at minimum slowed down the fire. The additional prescribed burns didn't happen for one reason or another, and local fire experts say that once the fire reached the north ridge of Bidwell Park, the fire took off towards Cohasset and Forrest Ranch, and into Tehama County. This is especially devastating to a region still recovering from the 2018 CampFire where 85 people lost their lives, more than 18,000 structures burned including 11,000 homes and had an estimated \$16.5 billion in damage. Not dealing with fire mitigation is a bad idea, and possibly contributed to a bad situation, made even worse, when it comes to the current Park Fire. Are there better ways to help protect Chico and what is left of our region's wildland and green spaces?

We all know about and love when the goats come to the park, but could the city perhaps partner with local agricultural communities or even Chico State to possibly host a city-owned flock? Maybe there could be a partnership with 4H or a local FFA program to have goats come as a community service program.

There is also an already existing supervised park vegetation mitigation program. The Leaf program is run by the City of Chico's parks department. They train and supervise volunteers to remove non-native plant species from Bidwell Park. Species such as English Ivy, that grows vertically up trees and can create a ladder for fire to climb up, must be manually removed, to not damage the native tree it is growing on, for instance. This is an ongoing task as many of these invasive species are extremely prolific.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge practices are available in our community. We must turn to practices that have been used for hundreds of years by the Native peoples to mitigate fire, such as controlled burns that are smaller and more frequent, to pay off the fire debt that has accumulated from overgrowth over many years.

As a community, we need to prioritize our greenways, but especially Bidwell Park, when it comes to fire mitigation. There needs to be a better plan to keep all of us safe from fire. Solutions are available. Let's not wait until it is too late, let us protect our beautiful cathedral of nature.



Photos from my last hike to Upper Bidwell Park, just a few days before the devastating Park Fire, July 28th, 2024

What To Do With Dead Trees??

By Wolfy Rougle, Planning and Watershed Program Manager at the Butte County Resource Conservation District

In Butte and Plumas Counties, we're looking at many square miles of fire-killed trees. What can we do with all the dead trees we can't mill? Here are the choices, as told to me over 6 years of my ecological education at the Butte County Resource Conservation District.

Choice #1: LEAVE THEM?

If there's no hazard to life or property, you can surely just do nothing. Dead wood nourishes legions of invertebrates, fungi, songbirds, woodpeckers and bats. Therefore, we always leave some standing dead trees on every project. Six "snags" per acre feel fair to us, so that's what we leave you if you enroll in our "Small Forest Landowner Assistance Program." The law allows leaving fewer. On a landscape-scale project, you could be like the Lassen National Forest and choose to leave 15% of all burned acres in beautiful, untouched snag field.

But any tree left standing can fall, endangering reforestation crews. So maybe you should drop the trees and let them rot on the ground? Fallen logs do increase baby trees' odds of survival. With enough time and skill, you can even "contour-fell" logs, so they'll trap sediment before it runs downhill. If there's a creek nearby, dropping trees into it will boost habitat complexity, as long as you're okay with a little flooding upstream.

Finally, each burned tree represents a lot of sequestered carbon – often 95% of the aboveground carbon the tree ate up during its lifetime. Doesn't it make sense to leave it on the land where it grew? But letting sleeping logs lie has risks. If another wildfire soon re-burns the area when it's very dry, those dry logs could burn so hot they damage the soil. That could set back reforestation, unleash erosion, and give you a landscape that looks more alpine than wooded. So, do you feel lucky?

Sad ending: Turns out, most of a dead log's carbon eventually vanishes back into the air whence it came, not the soil. Best of all from a carbon standpoint would be to bury logs – if there were some non-destructive, carbon-neutral way to do this.

Choice #2: BURN THEM?

In the dry West, our primary nutrient cyclers are not actually decay. It's fire.

The simplest way to turn a fully burned forest into a young forest again, then, is to "yard" all the dead trees together and burn them in giant piles. Pile-burning isn't risk-free: it causes more accidental escapes than prescribed fires do. However, it helps to burn when there's snow on the ground. Unless you tarped each pile perfectly, you're going to need a LOT of diesel and gasoline because that's how you get wet wood to burn. But you'll create a very "clean" (open, plantable) landscape. Sending all that wood up in smoke seems "wasteful"! But at least some of the trees' nutrients stay in the forest (especially calcium and potassium). And what would you rather do on a snowy day?

Choice #3: BIOMASS THEM?

Butte County grows huge volumes of trees and brush, and we don't have enough ungulates or beneficial fire anymore to consume it all. Can't we convert some of that extra biomass into energy? Well, thanks to a lot of folks' hard work, Butte County now has a "Bioeconomy Development Opportunity Zone" rating! Ratings help secure serious investment in biomass facilities. Unfortunately, our rating is BBB, the fourth-best grade available (out of four). In fact, every other rated locality in North America ranked higher than us, except poor Emporia, Kansas.

That doesn't mean we'll never get our biomass facility. It just means economists decided there are other places where a biomass facility would be cheaper or lower-risk to operate. However, the proposed new "OroCarbo" plant in Oroville still could happen! With its diverse outputs including renewable diesel, its approach is more practical than facilities that just make hydrogen.

Biomass facilities provide jobs, and give a forest owner a "clean slate" with less air pollution and a better bottom line than if the trees were burned in place. They also export minerals from the forest, and their profitability fluctuates with the price of diesel.

In conclusion. Once a tree dies, it's halfway gone. What happens to it in the second half of its sojourn on Earth depends on the human land manager's objectives, location and budget.

Wolfy Rougle is the planning and watershed program manager at the Butte County Resource Conservation District. She has worked since 2018 on projects that expand the use of prescribed fire and help regenerate climate-adapted forests. She can be reached at wolfy@bcrd.org

What in the World is CEQA?

*By Grace M. Marvin, Blue Oak Group Board Member and Conservation Chair;
Blue Oak Group Representative to the Mother Lode Chapter's Conservation and Executive Committees*

The California Environmental Quality Act -- called CEQA (pronounced seekwa)-- was passed in 1970 under President Reagan. Why does it matter to us? One local reason: a majority of Chico citizens are strongly against the proposed Valley's Edge housing project. (The land for the Valley's Edge housing development is in Butte County; it is not a part of the City of Chico. Chico's government hoped to incorporate that land into the city and benefit from the establishment of this large housing project -- as the majority of homes would be quite expensive.)

We displayed our repulsion through numerous letters, articles, and presentations to Chico Council as well as huge efforts by Smart Growth Advocates to gather enough signatures for a referendum that passed in May 2023. Because a Referendum stops the project for only one year, we have gone forward with a CEQA lawsuit by the Sierra Club, Aqualliance, and the Center for Biological Diversity. We do not yet know (in early August) whether or not we will win the lawsuit.

CEQA has been invoked to challenge a large variety of projects throughout California, e.g., involving forests, waters, open space, farmland, and air pollution. Those projects, which would degrade the environment, have resulted in legal challenges - with about 200 projects going to court each year. Many citizens are now calling for CEQA alterations to make greenhouse gas protections even stronger in light of the current effects of climate change on our state and planet.

CEQA identifies essential environmental protections in analyzing potential housing and other building projects. For example, the Valley's Edge project was scrutinized by CEQA lawyers and many other citizens regarding everything from the effects of the project on soil, wetlands, archeologically important lands, air quality, fire dangers, water availability, turtles, birds, to other wildlife. Many of us learned quite a bit about why that land is so important to preserve and were alarmed that fire had crossed over to it during the 2018 Camp Fire.

CEQA analyses also cover current and potential waterflow, drainage, noise and air pollution issues, such as Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions and their long-term effects on climate change. (Re Valley's Edge: we see that this project would mean much traffic - thus increasing GHG.)

CEQA is credited for its role in safe-guarding old-growth redwood trees, preserving water (amounts and quality), protecting land such as Martis Valley, and Owens Valley, and stopping oil wells from being installed in residential communities. And CEQA is part of the litigation of the Sierra Club and other groups fighting the Sites Reservoir and the Delta Tunnels.

California has greatly benefitted from CEQA, not only in protecting nature; it also is used in reviewing certain plans for large scale affordable housing. Such housing has often been built near polluting factories or in less advantaged parts of town. CEQA has been successful in preventing much housing from being located there, while it has contributed to affordable housing being built elsewhere.

Not surprisingly CEQA has been a major source of criticism, e.g., by some developers and real estate agents, while others have applauded CEQA. Many would agree, however, that CEQA legal cases can be quite expensive. City officials and residents view CEQA as harmful when they believe it has been used to stop their highly desired housing, businesses, highways, or other developments, i.e., local government and businesses would not obtain the expected revenue from the quashed project. Yet, it is noteworthy that many beautiful outdoor areas have been protected due to CEQA including Lake Tahoe, the San Francisco Bay, the Santa Monica Mountains, and the Headwaters Forest. (www.CEQAWORKS.org).

The Sierra Club notes that "CEQA legislation is a living document (that has been) continuously amended to make the review process function efficiently". Let's applaud CEQA's establishment and help utilize and fine tune it as needed.

Blue Oak Annual Picnic

By Betty Volker, Blue Oak ExCom

The Fourth Annual Blue Oak Group fall picnic will be held on Sunday, Oct. 6, 2024, at 5 mile Recreation Area in the Group Picnic Table area at the extreme east end of 5 mile. Parking lot is off of Centennial Ave in Chico.

Arrive around 5pm to socialize and food will be served around 5:30.

It's a potluck, so bring your favorite potluck dish to share, your own tableware and a favorite beverage.

For more information contact Betty Volker-
Bettyinchico@gmail.com.



Join the Fun! BLUE OAK GROUP NEEDS YOU!!

By Betty Volker, Blue Oak ExCom

Blue Oak Sierra Club needs people to be on the Executive Committee. We need YOU, and it's easy. The board meets once a month via zoom (no travel needed). Our meetings are usually about an hour, sometimes an hour and a half long. There are usually 5-7 people at the meeting.

We are looking for 2 to 3 newbies to start in January. The only requirement is having an interest in the local Sierra Club and what we do and being a Sierra Club member. Interested? Contact me:
Betty Volker Bettyinchico@gmail.com or our local Chair Suzette Welch booksontape@rocketmail.com.



Environmental Art and Poetry Event at MONCA, November 14-January 12

Ellery Akers, a northern California nature writer and artist, will show her artwork and read environmental poems at the Museum of Northern California Art in Chico this fall.

The show, *Love Letters to California*, will include a reading from her new award-winning book, *A Door into the Wild: Poetry and Art*.

Information: <https://monca.org/>

2024 Blue Oak Group Sierra Club

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Blue Oak Fall 2024 Outings and Events

Coordinated by Alan Mendoza. For updated outings information and for general information about outings and meeting places, please see our web site at: www.sierraclub.org/mother-lode/blue-oak

Saturday, August 31 - Brokeoff Mountain Peak Climb (3,C)

Climb 9235' Mt. Brokeoff in Lassen National Park. A climb of about 2600' and 7 miles round trip through a variety of conifers and meadows. Beautiful views along the way and at the top of Mt. Shasta, Mt. Lassen and the surrounding area. Bring lunch, water, hiking footwear and \$ for drivers. Meet at Chico Park and Ride at 7:30AM. Leader: Alan, 530-588-8031 or ajmendoza@prodigy.net.

Sunday, October 6— Fourth Annual Blue Oak Group Fall Picnic

Arrive around 5pm to socialize and food will be served around 5:30. It's a potluck, so bring your favorite potluck dish to share, your own tableware and a favorite beverage. 5 mile Recreation Area in the Group Picnic Table area at the extreme east end of 5 mile. For more information contact Betty Volker- Bettyinchico@gmail.com

Tuesday, November 19—Blue Oak Newsletter Prep for Mailing

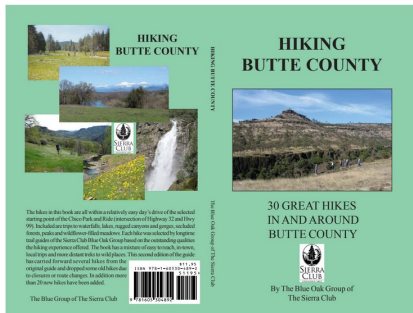
Join the mail crew on Tuesday, November 19, 2024, at 2:00 pm to process the Blue Oak Group Newsletter for mailing. The meeting place is the Lodge at the Terraces in California Park located at 2750 Sierra Sunrise Terrace. The Lodge is the older independent living section of California Park. Everyone is welcome to come and help. Please join us so we can quickly get the Newsletters ready to mail. The processing gathering provides a great excuse to get together, catch up on news and meet new people. Leader: Suzette Welch, Coeditor Blue Oak Group Sierra Club Newsletter.

Saturday, November 23 - North Rim Trail Day Hike (Conservation)

Enjoy upper Bidwell Park on a 7-8 mile hike on the North Rim Trail. Along the way we will get great views of Chico and the surrounding area and see the recovery from the Park Fire. We will then descend on a rough trail to pick up the Middle Trail and eventually drop down to the Yahi Trail. Rain cancels. Meet at Horseshoe Lake parking lot at 9AM. Leader: Alan, ajmendoza@prodigy.net or 530-588-8031

Hiking Butte County

By Alan Mendoza




The updated new third edition of the Blue Oak Group Sierra Club's **Hiking Butte County** book is now available. The book has several updated hikes and adds more hiking suggestions.

The cost is \$14.95, and it is available at **Mountain Sports** and **The Bookstore** in Chico. For more information, contact Alan Mendoza at 530-891-8789 or ajmendoza@prodigy.net.

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