



# Organizations for Rural Quality

*of Nevada County*

## *Biological Resources in Western Nevada County*

Nevada County adopted its third (1967, 1980 and 1995) and current General Plan in 1995. Although the County had employed a planning department since 1961, the 1995 Plan was the first adopted policy document that required comprehensive protection for the County's important vegetation and wildlife. The Plan specifically identified environmentally sensitive resources that the County would protect: rare and endangered species; wetlands; major deer migration corridors; critical range and critical fawning areas; landmark oaks (36 inches or greater diameter at breast height); landmark oak groves (areas with 33% canopy closure); rare and endangered species; riparian corridors within 100 feet of intermittent or perennial water courses; significant cultural resources; floodplains; important agricultural lands; significant mineral lands; earthquake faults; avalanche hazard areas; steep slopes over 30%; areas with high erosion potential; areas subject to fire hazards; and visually important ridgelines and viewsheds.

The General Plan provides specific policies that require all environmentally sensitive portions of a development project site to be retained as non-disturbance open space through clustered development on non-sensitive portions of the property. The goal is to promote continued viability of contiguous or inter-dependent wildlife habitats by avoiding fragmentation of existing habitat areas and preserving movement corridors between related habitats. Policies provide that when enforcement of protection standards precludes development of property, off-site mitigation (perpetual protection of the same resources on other property) is allowed. Additional policy also requires that the County monitor the sensitive wildlife and habitat resources in the County to ensure the continued validity and effectiveness of Plan policies intended to protect resources.

But it was clear during the five years it took to prepare the 1995 General Plan that the County lacked accurate and up to date biological resource information that was based on field surveys by professional biologists. While General Plan policies recognized the importance of natural resources to the ongoing social, economic and ecological health of the County, the reliable data were lacking. The Board of Supervisors initiated the Natural Heritage 2020 program in May 2000 to have the information generated by a team of accredited scientists.

The County's valuable but poorly understood NH2020 project was intended to identify important resources Countywide and develop a plan for protection. Unfortunately, the laudable effort, required to implement the General Plan, became a deceitful political attack tool. Despite all the purposefully destructive political rhetoric, the project did give County decision-makers and property owners who want to identify and protect important habitat an understanding of their properties' values. A scientific committee comprised of qualified scientists prepared the data, and it was peer reviewed by another team of scientists selected by organizations focused on property rights. The computer disk containing the Natural Resources Report is available to check out from a Nevada County Library.

Nevada County contains an extremely wide range of plants, animals and habitat types. The habitat diversity is related to topographic elevations ranging from 200 feet in the southwest County to 9,143 feet in the east. Annual precipitation levels vary from 30 inches in the west to 60 inches near the crest of the Sierra Nevada in the middle of the County. Generally, the County can be characterized by gently rolling oak woodlands in the west transitioning to coniferous forest and an almost desert-like association on the eastern slope of the Sierra in the Truckee area.

Nevada County supports a rich flora of 1,841 documented plant species representing about 26% of the total number of plant species in California. Approximately 350 of the 1,841 species are non-natives. The County contains a variety of wildlife habitats that are considered to be sensitive and/or important by local, state or federal agencies: wetlands, riparian areas and oak woodlands.

Congress passed the Federal Endangered Species Act in 1973 and California followed in 1984 with the California Endangered Species Act. Both Acts are aimed at protection of those species that are rare, endangered or threatened with extinction by protecting the ecosystems upon which those species depend. A variety of Federal and State agencies are responsible for enforcement and are consulted during the preparation of environmental documents when a development project is being processed.

Only four plant species that occur in Nevada County are listed as either Threatened or Endangered under the federal or state Endangered Species Acts: Tahoe yellow cress, Scadden Flat checkerbloom, Stebbins' morning glory, and Pine Hill Flannelbush.

About 19% of Nevada County's flora are non-native plant species. Some of these aggressive, invasive exotics present serious problems because they degrade natural areas, exclude native species, disrupt ecosystem processes, alter fire frequencies, reduce recreational values, and restrict economic returns on crops. The most widespread invasives in Nevada County are yellow star-thistle, ripgut brome, medusa-head, and Italian thistle. Scotch broom, Himalayan blackberry, and cheatgrass also are frequent pests.

Fifteen endangered species have known or potential occurrence in the County: valley elderberry longhorn beetle, Central Valley Chinook salmon, Central Valley steelhead, Lahontan cutthroat trout, California red-legged frog, bald eagle, Swainson's hawk, American peregrine falcon, black rail, sandhill crane, great gray owl, bank swallow, willow flycatcher, Sierra Nevada red fox, and California wolverine. The highest numbers of endangered vertebrates occur in fresh emergent wetlands, montane meadows, and barren areas.

According to the State Department of Fish and Game, the overall trend in the County is toward a decline in habitat values. A decline is not only detrimental to the environmental health of the County but to the development community as well. Such a decline could result in an increase in plant and animal species gaining formal listing as endangered, rare or threatened. Additionally, without ongoing management and monitoring, species in the County that are currently listed as endangered, rare or threatened could become extinct. Failure to monitor is also inconsistent with adopted General Plan policy.

The General Plan EIR concluded that buildout of the General Plan land uses would result in the direct loss of wildlife habitat and/or habitat fragmentation and that the loss would be a significant adverse impact, even with General Plan policies aimed at protection. Nevada County government's implementation of its policies as required by law would both enhance environmental health and reduce the legal vulnerability of County-approved projects wherein General Plan consistency is required.

