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March 14, 2011

Santa Barbara County
Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu St.
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
SBCOB@Co.Santa-Barbara.CA.US



Re: Amendments to County Brushing Ordinance and Administrative Fines Ordinance

Dear County Supervisors:

I am writing to express our support of the proposed amendments to the County Brushing Ordinance and the Administrative Fines Ordinance. These changes are necessary to ensure that County staff has the proper tools to oversee large-scale vegetation clearing within the County, and to ensure effective enforcement of ordinances that are already on the books. The increasing rate of chaparral clearing in our local foothills demands your immediate action today.

Los Padres ForestWatch is the only local nonprofit organization focused solely on protecting wildlife habitat and wilderness landscapes in the Los Padres National Forest. Many of our 800+ members have become increasingly alarmed at the amount of chaparral vegetation that is being cleared in and around the Los Padres National Forest, causing needless harm to wildlife habitat, water quality, and scenic views. In addition, several landowners adjacent to these cleared areas continue to express concerns that chaparral removal actually increases, rather than decreases, fire risk because it replaces fire-adapted native vegetation with weedy, invasive grasses with increased ignitability and flammability.

We fully support efforts to protect communities from wildfire, including the establishment of defensible space around structures, working with homeowners to retrofit homes with fire-safe materials, encouraging the planting and maintenance of agricultural orchards as buffers, and increasing the amount of resources available for wildfire prevention. On the other hand, the removal of large amounts of vegetation far away from structures may cause significant environmental impacts while usurping limited firefighting resources that might be better spent on more effective fire prevention activities. Given these constraints, it seems reasonable for the Board to give County staff the tools they need to adequately track and oversee large-scale vegetation removal projects, and to enforce violations when they occur.

Again, we fully support the proposed amendments to the County Brushing Ordinance and the Administrative Fines Ordinance regarding vegetation clearing, and urge your Board's approval of them. In addition, we hope that the Board will direct staff to return with additional amendments that will effectively protect our communities from wildfire in a way that best protects the environment. These future amendments should include making "brushing" permits discretionary (and thus subject to CEQA), and reducing the exemption threshold from 5 acres to 1 acre.

Thank you for your assistance in protecting our local chaparral habitats.

Sincerely,
/s/
Jeff Kuyper
Executive Director