



*The San Francisco Tree Council*

June 21, 2009

SF URBAN FOREST COUNCIL  
Department of the Environment  
City and County of San Francisco  
11 Grove Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102-4645

Re: Support for Letter Objecting to the UCSF "Fire Mitigation" Plan

Dear Urban Forest Council Members,

I assume item #7 on the 6/23/09 agenda refers to the letter – "Objections to the UCSF Fire Mitigation Plan." It states what I have been saying for many years, as a member Parnassus Community Action Team (PCAT), UCSF Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve, and it reiterates what was said last February, when UCSF invited SFTC to meet privately with them (I decided to include a neighbor, Paul Castleman and John Rizzo, SF Sierra Club), and what the public expressed at the last public meeting May 18<sup>th</sup>.

Please consider carefully what the Mt. Sutro citizens are saying. I agree with their concerns and also believe this plan does not reduce the risk of fire in the Mount Sutro area but actually increases fire risk, substantially.

The fire risk has been considerably overstated for the purpose of getting FEMA money. The Plan is to remove many trees that will affect the microclimate in the forest as well as in neighboring areas by making it drier and windier. The use toxic chemicals will affect the watershed area, will also cause the destruction of wildlife habitat. The removing of trees and undergrowth will increase the potential for dangerous landslides.

The historic 100-year-old forest is part of the character of the adjoining neighborhoods, and destroying it will adversely affect residents' environmental health, quality of life and property values.

None of the above are proper uses for Federal funding, including FEMA grants. Nor will this plan improve or preserve the historic forest.

Please join in support, of the many neighborhood citizens that rightfully object to the Mt. Sutro Fire Mitigation Plan. I regret that other commitments prevent my delivering this message in person.

Sincerely yours,

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*Working Together To Preserve & Protect Our Community Urban Forest, . . . . .  
For Nourishment for the Soul, Consolation for the Heart  
And Inspiration for the Mind*

## “IT LOOKS A LOT LIKE GARDENING” by Peter Scott

In opposition to the opinions of a considerable number of organizations and worthy individuals, I have proposed that there really is no such thing as a “native” plant. Measured by the earth’s age, all plants are newcomers.

Even as species developed and spread over millennia, there never was a time when a static, balanced plant community existed. Unless one returns to the primeval ferns, the idea of “native” vegetation depends on a snapshot of the environment at an arbitrarily selected moment in history.

What follows, for those who buy into that frozen moment in time, is a list of species that they consider to be “good” (native) and a list of species that they condemn as “bad” (non-native: aka exotic, alien, invasive).

The time frame favored by most nativists in this country is the period just prior to the arrival of European immigrants. For our San Francisco Bay area, ignoring the mission settlements, this criteria suggests late 18th century up to about 1835.

We have no photographs of our East Bay hills from that era; cameras were not yet available. We do know that very soon after settlers arrived, the land in this area was heavily grazed and logged; the earliest photos show the hills as barren grassy slopes. This is the image that nativists propose: grassland with a scattering of oaks, and chaparral lining gullies and creeks.

City agencies and various interest groups publish lists of “native” (approved) plants and non-natives. Most of the plants in your yard are not on the approved list – but poison oak and coyote brush are. And there is some fudging going on: redwoods are not native to our Claremont Canyon, but are now being planted and watered by loyal nativists.

**Peter Del Tredici, a member of the Massachusetts Invasive Plant Advisory Group and a senior research associate at Harvard University’s Arnold Arboretum** wrote an article for *Harvard Design Magazine* (Spring-Summer, 2004) “Neocreationism and the Illusion of Ecological Restoration” that comments on the issue of native plants. Here are some excerpts:

“Implicit in the proposals that call for control and/or eradication of invasive species is the assumption that the native vegetation will return to dominance. That’s the theory. The reality is something else.” “To assert that planting native species will restore the balance of nature is just another way of ignoring the problem.”

“The very same processes that have led to the globalization of the world economy— unfettered trade and travel among nations— have also led to the globalization of our environment.”

“[Native vs exotic] is an issue that seems to bring out the worst in people, not unlike the debates over gun control or abortion. . . [That] this pre-Columbian environment no longer exists— and cannot be recreated— does not seem to matter.” “. . . this so-called restoration process... looks an awful lot like gardening, with its ongoing need for planting and weeding. . . Is ‘landscape restoration’ really just gardening dressed up with jargon to simulate ecology?”

To read the complete article, go to:

[http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/20\\_ontechology.html](http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/20_ontechology.html)

On a recent nature walk in the hills with David Amme, EBRPD's Wildlife and Vegetation Program Manager, and expert on native plants, the discussion about good and bad species turned to the apparent non-feasibility of getting rid of all the "exotics." Amme responded that not all non-natives are "bad guys" and we should accept the fact that they are going to be part of our wildland environment.

Dramatically, in half-jest, he took off his cap and held it over his heart, saying: "I think we should just have a naturalization ceremony for these plants." I think it shocked some of the others but I admired his realistic response.

Nativists like to claim that an environment of native plants is healthier, and inherently more fire resistant, but there is no scientific basis supporting those claims. Fire likes dry fuel of any description, especially grasses, brush and small-diameter limbs.

Restoring the hills to an open grassland dotted with trees and chaparral will simply encourage annual fires like those that race through the canyons of Southern California, because that environment is imminently more prone to ignition than a mature, canopied forest. The tall trees in and around Claremont Canyon catch the moisture in the morning fogs and increase the humidity in the understory; the first step toward discouraging ignition is to maintain the canopy.

What the native-plant adherents are attempting is a redefinition of the concept of "wildland." Instead of an untamed and undomesticated ecology, they are substituting a managed and maintained artificial landscape. As the Harvard professor wrote:

"It looks a lot like gardening... **And when something doesn't appear to make sense, one strategy is to follow the money.** Clearly, there are nativists who derive an income from the landscape transformation they so earnestly support.

A natural landscape is an evolving community of species, continually changing according to environmental conditions. There will be newcomers and there will be casualties. As David Amme pointed out, Mediterranean exotics "just love it here" because of our extended rainy season, and they are not what he calls "bad guys."

On the other hand, we have "native" bad guys like coyote brush: the new growth is fine, but underneath is a tangle of small-diameter, oil-laden dead wood. In a Diablo wind, the coyote brush hurls as many firebrands as any tall tree.

The point is: we need to abandon the native/nonnative concept. It is based on false assumptions, it supports species-cleansing, and it distracts (and diverts financial support) from more important issues in the wildland-urban interface.