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Enhancing Biodiversity and Saving Water with Native Plants at County Facilities

The Board recently passed a water conservation policy which aims to significantly reduce LA County facilities’ water usage, a critical endeavor given climate change and the current drought. Building on this new policy, this current motion explores and promotes the benefits of biodiversity-enhancing California native landscapes as a water saving strategy.

California native plants evolved to thrive in our local soils and Mediterranean climate, where summers are hot and dry, and most rain falls during the autumn, winter, and early spring months. Animals in Los Angeles County evolved along with these plants. Many animals depend on native flora--their host plants--which they consume, pollinate, and use as shelter. A healthy, biodiverse ecosystem depends upon plants that are native to the area.

Los Angeles County is located within a globally recognized biodiversity hot spot—one of just 36 biodiversity hot spots in the world. More than 4,000 distinct species of plants and animals are unique to this region. Our local mountains, waterways, coastal wetlands, and sand dunes are all important habitats for a diverse suite of plants and animals.

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Humans, like all animals, depend on healthy ecosystems that are in balance. By protecting biodiversity, we protect our own health and our future. As habitat dwindles in our cities, every patch of land is important for the survival of species, from birds, bees, and butterflies, to bats and bobcats--and for humans, too. Even in dense urban areas, wildlife can thrive under the right conditions.

And yet, most residents and commercial facilities owners in L.A. County are unaware of the benefits of native plants both as a water conservation strategy and for ecosystem health. Thirsty, non-native turf grasses and ornamental plants are the norm for Southern California gardens. Alternatives that promote plastic lined xeriscape or artificial turf may use less water, but they are profoundly problematic in that they are known to damage ecosystem health, add plastic waste to the environment, and increase the heat island effect.

The County recognizes the importance of habitat conservation, including in its establishment of the North Area Plan, the Santa Monica Mountains Local Coastal Program, and the updated Significant Ecological Areas plan; however, the County does not always implement biodiversity-supportive practices on its own properties. Relying too often on old practices of using ornamental, water-thirsty plants, “pest resistant” plants, and non-native sod, the County of Los Angeles could arguably improve its ability to model ecosystem enhancing landscape practices.

As care for native plants is distinct from plants often used in Southern California gardens, landscape personnel must be provided with training to ensure they are familiar with which native plants do best in which environments, their soil needs, growth patterns, water needs, and dormancy phases. In addition, for native plant gardens to fully function to support and enhance biodiversity, personnel must be trained to cease or avoid to the extent possible any use of herbicides and pesticides in native plant gardens. Use of

herbicides and pesticides is not sustainable and removes food sources for wildlife, including native pollinators.

By converting landscapes at County buildings to at least 75 percent native shrubs, grasses, herbaceous plants and trees, and institutionalizing practices that will support these landscapes, the County can be a role model to help reduce its water use, help prevent further ecosystem degradation, and actively promote thriving biodiversity.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Chief Sustainability Office, in consultation with relevant departments, including the Departments of Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Regional Planning, Beaches and Harbors, Internal Services Department, and LA County/City Native American Indian Commission, to report back within 210 days in writing on pathways to replace high water-need, non-functional grasses and non-native ornamental plants with plants and trees native to the California Floristic Province at all County facilities, with the goal of achieving over time at least 75 percent California native plants and trees in all landscaping. The report back should do the following:
 - a. Identify and summarize existing County and external efforts and resources for establishing and managing California native landscaping, including planting palettes for LA County by region; irrigation practices such as greywater reuse for native plants; gardening practices that minimize use of pesticides and herbicides; and best management practices for protecting and enhancing biodiversity;
 - b. Provide recommendations on native landscaping guidelines for County facilities, including identifying any gaps in existing efforts and resources that need to be addressed to develop comprehensive guidelines;

- c. Propose a timeline and potential pathways for achieving 75% native California plantings at County managed facilities--both at existing structures and newly constructed facilities;
- d. Provide recommendations for ensuring adequate training of County staff and contractors who perform landscape management practices on County properties; and
- e. Provide recommendations for sharing findings and pursuing joint implementation with relevant external stakeholders including cities and private property owners.