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Advancing Los Angeles County’s Local and Global Leadership on Biodiversity

Los Angeles County sits within a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot and is home to over 4,000 species of plants and animals – including over 50 endangered species – more than any US country outside of Hawaii. Its mountains, rivers, coastlines, and deserts support a remarkable range of ecosystems found in few other places on earth. Yet this biodiversity is under pressure from urbanization, climate change, invasive species, wildfires, and pollution. Protecting and restoring native habitats is not only vital to the survival of local species, but also essential to community well-being. Healthy ecosystems provide clean air and water, buffer against extreme heat and flooding, improve mental and physical health, and offer spaces for recreation and cultural connection. Given its scale, diverse communities, and regional influence, Los Angeles County has a unique opportunity and responsibility to advance biodiversity conservation and model sustainable practices that support both people and nature. It can also serve as a national and even global source of biodiversity leadership and inspiration, particularly in the absence of leadership on sustainability issues at the federal level.

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The Board has previously adopted a Water Conservation Policy to reduce water use at County facilities, a necessary step given persistent drought and the realities of climate change. This policy has supported greater efficiency in irrigation and landscaping, helping the County do its part to conserve scarce water resources. Notably, the policy restricts the use of potable water to irrigate nonfunctional turf, such as grass in front of buildings and along parkways and prohibits the use of artificial turf with some exceptions. The Metropolitan Water District (MWD) offers rebates to support turf removal and tree planting, as well as technical assistance for turf removal projects.

Building on this foundation, there is now an opportunity to broaden the policy to explicitly integrate biodiversity into the design and management of County properties. Doing so would integrate practices that include but are not limited to increasing the use of California native plants and promoting landscaping practices that support biodiversity, such as exploring further limits on artificial turf. We can also use this policy to incorporate relevant recommendations from the Indigenous Peoples Day and We Are Still Here reports, and incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in partnership with local Tribal Governments, communities, organizations, and knowledge holders drawing on time-tested practices for managing land, water, and fire in ways that align with natural systems. Expanding the scope of this policy would not only further conserve water, but also enhance climate resilience, improve habitat connectivity, and set an example for cities, institutions, and residents across the region.

California native plants are uniquely adapted to local soils and climate, requiring less water and maintenance while providing habitat for pollinators, birds, and other wildlife. They also support climate resilience by reducing heat island effects, improving

stormwater management, and restoring degraded lands. Beyond their environmental benefits, native plants contribute to healthier communities by creating shaded, cooler public spaces, reducing exposure to harmful chemicals, and reflecting the natural and cultural heritage of the region. Their expanded use across County properties can strengthen biodiversity, improve environmental performance, and create more resilient landscapes that support the County's operations and long-term sustainability goals. County departments are already leading the way with native plants. For example, LA County Parks has trained its grounds maintenance staff through the Theodore Payne Foundation California Native Plant Landscaper Certification program. LA County Library has created an internal policy to use native plants for new landscaping when possible; and since 2022, Library has planted California native plants at eight library locations, including El Monte, View Park, and Compton.

These initiatives align with global efforts to stem a biodiversity crisis that has seen a 73% decline in wildlife populations over the past 50 years, caused by habitat loss, environmental degradation, and climate change. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted in December 2022, is the most comprehensive global agreement on biodiversity, agreed to by 196 nations. It sets 23 action-oriented targets for 2030 to protect biodiversity and restore ecosystems. While only national governments are formal parties to the treaty, Los Angeles County's internationally recognized sustainability plans are aligned with the majority of the GBF. For example, the Parks Needs Assessment (PNA) highlights areas of highest park need and has guided investments to advance equity in park access, supporting Target 12 (enhance green spaces and urban planning for biodiversity and human well-being). The Parks Needs

Assessment Plus (PNA+) adopted as the County's 30 x 30 framework, has engaged a coalition of partners to identify priority areas for conservation and restoration, advancing Target 3 (conserve 30 percent of land and waters). The OurCounty Sustainability Plan integrates nature-based solutions for climate adaptation, advancing Target 8 (minimize climate change impacts on biodiversity). The Community Forest Management Plan promotes tree canopy expansion and equity, advancing Target 10 (enhance biodiversity and sustainability in forestry). The Youth Climate Commission (YCC) demonstrates leadership on Target 22 (ensure participation in decision-making and equitable governance), ensuring that youth voices inform sustainability and biodiversity policy.

The YCC, the first body of its kind in the nation, recently urged the Board of Supervisors to strengthen its alignment with global biodiversity efforts by becoming an official observer to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and by joining the California Global Biodiversity Alliance (CalGBA). Becoming an observer to the CBD would allow the County to formally participate in international negotiations on biodiversity, and joining CalGBA would enable the County to collaborate with other California jurisdictions committed to implementing the GBF at the state and local level. At a time of federal government retreat from international cooperation and progress towards environmental conservation and stewardship, these steps would elevate the County's role as an international leader in biodiversity and sustainability while reinforcing its commitment to youth priorities.

By updating County policy to integrate biodiversity with water conservation and by formalizing its role in global biodiversity efforts, Los Angeles County can reaffirm its commitment to sustainability, equity, and intergenerational responsibility.

! WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1. Direct the Chief Sustainability Office (CSO), in consultation with the LA County Parks Department, Chief Executive Office, Public Works, Internal Services Department, including all other relevant County departments, and local Tribes, to revise the County's Water Conservation Policy into a comprehensive Biodiversity and Water Conservation Policy, and report back to the Board for its consideration by August 2026. The updated policy shall include, but not be limited to:
 - a. Requirements and guidelines for the use of California native plants at new and existing County facilities with consideration of reasonable exclusions for arboretums and functional turf for recreational uses where native plants are not viable; and
 - b. Guidelines for biodiversity-supportive management practices.
2. Authorize the CSO to submit applications for Los Angeles County to become an official observer to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity; and
3. Authorize the CSO to submit applications for Los Angeles County to join the California Global Biodiversity Alliance.

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