

Cambria Forest Committee June 13, 2025 meeting summary

The meeting was called to order by Chair Crosby Swartz at 10:06 AM. In attendance were CFC Secretary Christine Heinrichs, Treasurer Laura Swartz, CFC Board member Julie Jorgensen, Greenspace Executive Director Karin Argano, Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve (FFRP) Executive Director Kitty Connolly, Spencer Gordon Forestry Project Manager for Upper Salinas - Las Tablas Resource Conservation District (US-LT RCD), Dan Turner Executive Director San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council, Riley Mc Farland Registered Professional Forester with Auten Resource Consulting (ARC), Lara Rachowicz Senior Ecologist with Ascent Environmental Inc, and Harry Farmer Board Director Cambria Community Services District and CFC liaison.

The meeting began with a brief introduction by all in attendance. This was followed by a Public Comment from Laura Swartz expressing her concern about the severity of weed abatement practices of the contractor hired by the CCSD to clear lots owned by the District, noting that at some locations most everything was cut down to the bare ground, while at times Scotch Broom was not removed. She questioned the training of those doing the work.

Chair Swartz then recommended we now move to Agenda item 6.1; Discussion about the Draft Project Specific Analysis for SLO-RESIL., as some in attendance were present mainly to discuss this item. Mr Gordon then began the discussion by stating that the upcoming project would not be much different from the work done on the Covell Ranch, Rancho Marino, Pico Creek and San Simeon Point. He elaborated that these projects would be in a much larger area in the Coastal Zone under the RCD's jurisdiction. Ms Jorgensen then expressed her concern as to the speed and scope of the project, as from her perspective it appeared, “you are trying to do as much as you can as quickly as you can!”, and would it be possible to “use more caution...go a little more slowly...”. She further suggested observing other projects that had been implemented and examining how these efforts had responded over time. Crosby then expressed his concern as to the extremely large area being covered, and that he’d never seen a Project Specific Analysis (PSA) of this size in the Coastal Zone. He elaborated by observing the possibility of 200 trees out of 400 trees per acres being cut down in the stated Project Area of 88,000 acres, and how would this effect the health of the forest.

At this point Riley McFarland addressed the concerns being voiced, stating that despite the overall large number of acres involved, that right now current implementation plans are for about 100 acres at a time, mainly off of Cambria Pines Road. He provided much detail as to, “the environmental protections and measures and surveys” that would have to be done even on smaller projects. As to financial cost, he stated that getting the 88,000 acres covered under one permit would be far more efficient than obtaining numerous permits for each individual project, which would mean spending a much greater amount of taxpayer dollars. Also, he remarked that of the 88,000 acres, not all was Monterey Pine forest, including areas covered by various non forested habitat.

After Riley’s extensive and thoughtful comments, Spencer Gordon further elaborated by saying he totally understood the basic concerns regarding tree removal, and “once you take things away you can’t bring them back.” He added there are long term research plots scattered throughout Cambria, and that RCD is consistently monitoring and learning from the work that’s being done, including the Covell Ranch and Rancho Marino.

Greenspace ED Karin Argano then spoke about the upcoming project in Strawberry Canyon that would

hopefully begin in July, and that in working with Spencer and Riley Greenspace has total autonomy in determining what is and isn't being done in the Canyon, from removal of trees and plants, to biological studies, and so forth. She added this was being modeled after the nearby Rancho Marino project, where, "the work done has really made a difference in the health of the forest", and that in Strawberry Canyon the focus would be on dead and dying trees, and hopefully no other trees would have to be taken out. She also remarked on the positive nature the permitting process, and how covering the large number of acres would be financially beneficial to non profits such as Greenspace and FFRP.

Lara Rachowicz then spoke to the regional nature of various projects, figuring out which are more important, and that the pace would not be much greater than has already taken place in the past few years. She added, "it would be much easier to obtain grant funding once CEQA and Coastal Act authorization has been obtained for the whole area." She also said there's been much coordination with the various Federal and State biological Agencies as well as California Coastal Commission staff who are "supportive and comfortable with this" endeavor. She then provided a brief but detailed visual presentation of the project document titled, "North Coastal San Luis Obispo County Regional Ecological Strategies for Improving Landscapes (SLO-RESIL).

Upon conclusion of the presentation, Laura Swartz expressed her concern that private landowners would not be as knowledgeable or concerned about the welfare of the forested lands and the work being done as groups such as Greenspace or FFRP. Crosby then remarked that there doesn't seem to be an accounting for the number of trees that need to be removed. He added that trees absorb carbon dioxide, which is a good thing, and fewer trees means less absorption of CO₂. Therefore, the thinning of the forests and reducing the absorption of carbon dioxide is counterproductive for the health of the environment. Lara responded by stating research has led to conflicting results as to carbon absorption by trees, that fewer trees can lead to larger trees and greater CO₂ absorption, plus removing aging trees that are absorbing less CO₂ is helpful as well. And while Crosby then concurred that this was an area of some disagreement, there needs to be more evidence provided in the SLO-RESIL document. Riley remarked that this topic is a very complicated aspect of the projects being addressed, as is forest management in general. He added there has been an incredible and unprecedented amount of carbon being released in the massive fires in California over the past 10-20 years that needs to be considered when we talk about future treatment of the forests, especially as forests cannot regenerate naturally due to the excessive fires continuing to occur. He sees the treatments being considered as "the lower intensity option". For example, Riley alluded to the work that has been done on the Covell Ranch that has encouraged natural regeneration of the forest.

Dan Turner then spoke to the issue, stating it's best not to focus on just one aspect of forest health, and "this isn't rocket science, forestry is more complicated than rocket science". For example, he noted that tree spacing has been useful in lessening the spread of various diseases such as pitch canker, western gall rust and mistletoe. He added different levels of treatment have been implemented for over a decade to see how the forest has responded, and varying techniques and treatments have been used locally for specific site conditions, from San Simeon Point, to Covell Ranch and Rancho Marino, as well as work being considered in Strawberry Canyon. FFRP ED Connolly then spoke to the situation, saying that on the Ranch they're having all sorts of difficulty coming up with a specific treatment plan because so many areas are different, and they each need a different way of being addressed. But then she added that since 2019 the understory had regenerated, the pines were doing well, and recently she noticed the oaks were recovering and growing very well having been limbed up so the deer were no longer nibbling on them. As a result, she feels very hopeful moving forward as to the

remainder of the treatment on the Ranch. Laura Swartz then said she'd observed the treatment on the Ranch had "taken out a lot of the green vegetation", and now poison oak was growing in abundance and taken over where coffee berry and sticky monkey are, so that while regeneration had taken place, it has not been necessarily what was wanted. Kitty confirmed that the use of wood chips has encouraged poison oak and raspberry, and the chips are not very helpful for the forest. Riley then spoke to errors that may have been made in the past, but that Auten Resources are still endeavoring to abide by the best forest management practices, and therefore what is best for the land, the people and the community. He added that the projects are so dynamic and complex that they need a long term approach to best address them.

At this point Crosby thanked everyone for their participation on such an informative and open discussion on Forest Health and the various treatment practices taking place. At this time Spencer Gordon, Lara Rachowicz, Dan Turner and Riley McFarland expressed their appreciation for the discussion and said goodbye.

Returning back to the regular Agenda, Laura Swartz provided the Treasurer's Report. As of today the bank balance is \$1635.31, \$300 less than last month having paid CPA Lynne Singer and the Federal Government. She also expressed appreciation to Ms Singer for continuing to assist the 501(c)3 non profits she's been working with for hopefully the next couple of years.

Moving on with Organizational Reports, neither representatives from the Native Plant Society or the Fire Safe Forest Group were present. FFRP ED Connolly then spoke to the CCSD's proposed Ranch Budget, saying that while in 2023-24 and years past the proposed budget was \$50,000 a year for contractors to do work on the Ranch, in 2024-25 the amount has now been cut to just \$15,000. She added that Ranch management on the part of CCSD has changed dramatically on how weeds are being controlled and mowing is taking place, and while some good things continue happen, she's concerned about how little funding is now available for contractor work, and that the upcoming budgeted amount for 2025-26 will only be raised slightly to \$16,500. Laura then remarked that a number of years ago the District had proposed hiring a Ranch Manager specifically to attend to Ranch needs but nothing ever came of this. Kitty then said Carlos Mendoza had done a fine job as Ranch manager and was very knowledgeable, and now David Aguirre was now filling the position. Both Kitty and Laura then expressed a combination of appreciation but mostly frustration as to present circumstances as to the District caring for the Ranch. Kitty said the FFRP Board of Directors plans to take a "wait and see" approach in the coming year to see what transpires. Crosby remarked that sometimes with a natural forest the less you do the better, that sometimes work is done that wasn't needed, and most important is the control of invasive species and removing hazards such as fallen trees.

Julie then spoke to the aspect of tourism, and how important it was to care for the Ranch to help attract visitors to the area. Kitty stated the Ranch doesn't bring any direct revenue to the CCSD, and perhaps is seen by the CCSD as a financial burden. Karin Argano asked Kitty about her biggest concern, and what would not be getting done on the Ranch this year. Kitty said thankfully there were no serious storms this past year, but nevertheless thistle and mustard were growing out of control. She said flammability was one of her major concerns for the community, not just on the Fiscalini Ranch, but the Covell Ranch and elsewhere. For a number of minutes attendees expressed serious concerns as to the Ranch budget issue, frustration with the problematic fashion in which various projects are being minimized such as trail maintenance, and other areas where it's felt the CCSD decision making and action taking could be more productive.

Greenspace ED Argano brought us up to date on GS activities, beginning with the potential start date of improvements in Strawberry Canyon on Tuesday, July 8th, for which she and others are super excited. The GS Speaker Series continues, with Derrick Williams doing a presentation on “California Water” on Sunday afternoon, June 29th at 4PM at the UU Church on Arlington, part of the Greenspace Community Education Program. She added that the recent "Adventure Auction was amazing, it was fun, it was a great evening, and we'll do it again next year",

There were no reports from Rancho Marino Reserve or the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo.

Crosby and Laura made some brief comments as to the District's weed abatement program, including that the deadline for clearing lots is July 1st.

Julie Jorgensen then addressed her discussions with Cal Fire officials and Chief Michael Burkey at Cambria Fire as to the maintenance of her property, and that the condition of her lot was totally acceptable to both agencies. Laura then spoke to the contractor work being done in the area, and that trees have been limbed up creating a wind tunnel and therefore a significant fire danger. Laura and Julie further expressed their concern as to the severity of some of the lot clearing, and what might be on the horizon regarding weed abatement and fuel reduction in Fern Canyon.

The topic of poison oak was briefly touched upon as well.

The meeting was adjourned by Chair Swartz at 11:27 AM.

The next Forest Committee Meeting will be on Friday, July 11, 2025 at 10AM via Zoom.

This summary was written and submitted by CCSD Director and CFC liaison Harry Farmer.