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Comments: California 2030 Natural and Working Lands Climate Change Implementation Plan Concept Paper

On behalf of the California Building Industry Association (CBIA), we offer these comments on the above noted concept paper.

CBIA is a statewide trade association representing thousands of member companies including homebuilders, land developers, trade contractors, architects, engineers, designers, suppliers and other industry professionals. CBIA and its members are key and essential partners in assisting the state in meeting its substantial housing needs and in reducing GhG emissions in balance with economic growth through the implementation of Senate Bill 375.

The overall objective of the concept paper is to use what is broadly referred to as natural and working lands to help mitigate the effects of climate by removing carbon from the atmosphere and sequestering it in soils and vegetation. We are told that by *protecting land from conversion to more intensified uses ... and avoiding greenfield development ...* (a term the paper does not define but seems to associate with land “degradation” and “disturbance”) we can achieve, social, economic, health and environmental benefits. While these are certainly worthy goals, it must not be overlooked that these very benefits are inherent in other activities as well such as ensuring Californians have adequate and affordable housing; that linear infrastructure activities (roads, water, electricity) are carried out to support growing and future populations; and that in rural, ranching and agricultural areas of the state policies go beyond just “conservation” and address the broader social and economic needs of these residents.

The concept paper introduces the notion of an “all lands”¹ approach for carbon sequestration and GhG reduction and acknowledges that it is “ambitious.” What isn’t acknowledged is that it may also produce the very outcomes it seeks to avoid. By avoiding development in areas where it may make sense for development to occur --- even if it is on so-called natural lands – one must consider whether such a policy will make California’s scarce and high-cost housing even less attainable and costlier... and GhG problems even more acute. Where will the prospective residents of that avoided development go? If recent reports from real estate groups Redfin and Trulia are to be believed, many working families struggling to achieve middle-class status will move elsewhere to other areas of California or to other states entirely. This leakage has profound and negative social, economic, health and environmental consequences.

¹ The “all lands” approach, according to TABLE 1 -- Proposed Management Activities – is aimed universally at protecting all land types from conversion. Presumably even those necessary to help meet the 180,000 new units yearly according to state housing reports.

Likely a significant portion of the “all lands” identified in the paper is held in private ownership. It is not unrealistic to think that for those private landowners the respective value of their land far exceeds simply performing as a carbon sink. What other values are important to protect in a conservation setting? Are all open space lands worthy of protection and conservation? If protecting and conserving lesser quality non-irrigated, non-productive land for extended periods of time -- or into perpetuity -- is the objective are we really prepared to view the land as a utility, to regulate it for the public good and to guarantee the landowner a profit so that he/she is not forced to go out of business if the economics of the protectionist policy fail to pan out?

The paper mentions conservation easements. We have long maintained that, between willing parties, funding public and private stewardship of resources in both rural and urban areas is a valuable strategy. That said, the tone of the paper leaves one with the very distinct impression that the “vision” is to maintain a more static economy by reducing urban uses of natural and working lands through government interventions. A better vision – and one more consonant with the desires of rural citizens -- is of a dynamic society and economy containing most of the urban suite of uses, that allows for orderly expansion of rural communities but at lesser density and sited so as not to compromise the inherent rural character. This suggests that rural investment not be viewed as a way of turning rural California into a government-controlled conservation sink for Wall Street speculators or as a wildlife menagerie for urban visitors. Any plan to conserve natural and working lands must also advance and address issues such as economic stagnation and chronic rural under employment. A working lands strategy must make a commitment to rural equity by investing in residential, commercial and retail endeavors where appropriate and in more conventional infrastructure such as roads, water and energy systems.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the concept paper and look forward to working with you to address these comments in the implementation plan. If you would like to discuss these comments, please don’t hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Nick Cammarota
Sr. Vice President & General Counsel
California Building Industry Association