

# The California Chaparral Institute

...the voice of the chaparral

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**For Immediate Release, June 11, 2009**

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## **Group Files Lawsuit to Protect Chaparral and People From Wildfire**

### **Clearing Project By San Diego County Ignores Science and Law**

SAN DIEGO, *Calif.* – The California Chaparral Institute has just filed a lawsuit in California Superior Court challenging a failure by the County of San Diego to follow state law, include public participation, and provide proper scientific oversight in planning a 3-4 year, \$7 million project to remove trees and shrubs in natural areas.

On May 13, 2009, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors approved the Vegetation Clearing Project and exempted the Project from environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act. The Clearing Project would remove habitat in rural backcountry areas with a specific focus on trees up to 500 feet away from structures and roads.

The Clearing Project followed on the heels of a controversial overarching county report describing management of forest and shrublands that was strongly criticized by scientists and conservationists. At the time the report was adopted, the supervisors promised that an “appropriate environmental review” would be conducted “for any new proposed projects which would implement actions identified in the vegetation management report.” The Clearing Project was identified in that report but was exempted from environmental review when approved on May 13, 2009.

“Instead of focusing on developing a comprehensive fire management plan, the County of San Diego is engaged in a misguided campaign against nature”, said Richard Halsey, Director of the California Chaparral Institute. “We strongly support government assistance for reasonable vegetation management around homes. But the County’s focus on clearing trees deemed unhealthy nearly two football field lengths away from structures and roads is a waste of taxpayer money. It is not only harmful to nature but can also greatly increase the threat of wildfire to people when highly flammable weeds

invade native habitat due to clearance operations. The project may also lead to the spread of the gold-spotted oak beetle that is killing thousands of oak trees in the region.”

“State law requires a thorough analysis of the potential benefits and harm from any government project to prevent unintended, negative consequences”, said attorney Rory Wicks. “Yet here the County Board of Supervisors has ignored repeated requests for a collaborative and comprehensive fire management plan and turned a blind eye to potential harm to communities and nature from the Clearing Project. This lawsuit is a last resort to prevent the County’s short-sighted quest for federal dollars from compromising public safety and natural resources.”

The project deflects attention away from what needs to be done - assisting residents to retrofit their homes and reducing hazardous fuels directly next to communities. This issue was highlighted in a new study released June 6, 2009 that **federal programs intended to reduce wildfire risks in the West have been largely ineffective** because fuel-reduction efforts seldom hit areas near homes and businesses (Schoennagel et al. 2009).

Over the past five years, the California Chaparral Institute, the San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum, and others have worked to help San Diego County develop a sufficient fire protection system to protect lives, property, and natural resources from wildfire. While the County has improved its fire-safe building and planning codes for new construction, it has consistently failed to provide adequate funding to create an organized fire protection system.

San Diego County spends less on fire protection than any other county in Southern California, yet it remains one of the most fire prone regions in the United States. To partially make up for this lack of funding the County has depended on federal grants to conduct habitat-clearing projects to attempt to reduce fire risk in the backcountry on a short-term basis.

The California Chaparral Institute seeks to compel the County to prepare a long-term, comprehensive fire management plan that will include a collaborative process that includes all stakeholders including fire agencies, scientists, conservation organizations, land managers, community groups, and private land owners.

For more details on the lawsuit please visit the California Chaparral Institute Website: <http://www.californiachaparral.org>

*The California Chaparral Institute is a non-profit science and education organization dedicated to promoting an understanding and respect for the chaparral ecosystem and helping communities reconnect with the natural environment.*