

Protecting the Environment from the Unintentional

by Supervisor Linda Parks, February 2007

Understanding the interrelatedness of natural resources can help us protect the environment. From climate change caused by burning fossil fuels, to increased flooding caused by loss of wetlands, some of our biggest environmental problems today come from seemingly unrelated actions that were later found to be quite related.

For example, some of the public works projects I've encountered have had the unintended consequence of degrading the environment. I've seen rock rip rap or concrete groins built on one side of a creek to protect it from erosion, cause water to ricochet to the other side and erode the opposite bank. If the only answer to bank destabilization is to continue to 'harden' the sides of the waterway, an entire creek or river can become a concrete channel, eliminating habitat, reducing the potential for water to percolate into the ground, and creating surges of stormwater downstream. We've seen the loss of 90% of California's wetlands. Can natural rivers and creeks be far behind?

When you calculate the true long-term costs of today's capital projects in comparison to sustainable alternatives, you often find less cost and more benefits in preserving ecosystems. Instead of building a dam with a 40-year life that costs exponentially more to decommission than to build, or a system of debris basins that must be cleaned out after major storms, we are learning new ways to build and in some cases not to build. Preserving open space, providing areas for recharge, utilizing wetlands, and incorporating new materials that allow both vegetation and stabilization are some of the cost-effective and environmentally superior ways to develop without destroying natural resources.

Another example of unintended secondary impacts that are harmful to the environment comes from a study of bobcats conducted by the National Park Service. In the last few years the population of bobcats in the Santa Monica Mountains Recreation Area has plummeted. The primary reason for the sudden decline was traced to anticoagulant poisons found in rodenticides, such as D-Con. These rodenticides are commonly purchased at the local grocery store or nursery to kill rats, gophers and other rodents. Unfortunately, as the poison moves up the food chain, wildlife is unintentionally poisoned. Ninety percent of the bobcats and mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains Recreation Area have some level of anticoagulants, such as bromadiolone and brodifacoum, in their systems. In addition, National Park Service incident reports in California and New York indicate that secondary exposure to these chemicals were found in 81% of horned owls and 58% of red-tailed hawks.

I've worked on educating the public on how the bait they use to kill rats can also kill mountain lions. I've lobbied the State to pull anticoagulant rodenticides from store shelves, and had our County stop using the poisons on our golf courses and parks. We also approved an Integrated Pest Management Plan to reduce secondary poisoning from rodenticide bait at our critical flood control facilities, a plan that the National Park

Service suggested be a model. Now there is a great opportunity to protect wildlife from these poisons. The Environmental Protection Agency proposes to restrict their sale and application, and the public has until March 10, 2007 to comment. If you'd like to take a stand, you can write a comment letter in support of the ban to: Office of Pesticide Programs (OPP) Regulatory Public Docket (7502P), Environmental Protection Agency, 1200 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20460-0001. You can learn more about the proposal on the EPA's website: www.epa.gov.

As a County Supervisor, I am fortunate to be in a position where I can help bring about changes to protect our natural environment. Knowing that common practices can have unintentional but significantly negative impacts, it is up to each of us to establish smarter practices for a sustainable, cost-effective, and healthy environment.