

East Bay Public Grasslands

A rose is a rose is a rose.

There is no there there.

What is a “grassland”? More to the point, what is an East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) Grassland? By one measure, grassland represents more than half of the Park District’s total acreage in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, some 55,000 acres. That’s an important chunk of public open space and an impressive proportion of the EBRPD property.

But what is it? What does it consist of? Grass, no doubt, and some other herbs, forbs, and trees. But there are various kinds of native-heritage grasslands in the EBRPD, and each has its own set of species (and its own distinctive sweet odors). Park District grassland is the largest such plant community in the local public trust. It has an ancient ecological, evolutionary heritage and contains extraordinary biodiversity, all worth preserving for our children’s appreciation and enjoyment.

There have been exciting developments in the East Bay Regional Park District over the past seven years regarding Park District grasslands management. These include a special EBRPD task force review of its grasslands management goals and practices. The results of that review included a revision of the District’s “Wildland Management Policies and Guidelines”, reassignment of responsibilities among staff for grasslands management oversight, initiation of a five-year study of grasslands management issues, and hiring of new staff dedicated to grasslands vegetation management. CNPS provided input to the task force over the course of its public hearings, as well as before and since.

It’s now six years since the task force made its report and actions on its recommendations began. CNPS believes it is timely to ask “How are things going?”. Specifically, CNPS has invited the EBRPD to sit down with us to address this very question.

Why does CNPS believe it’s important to ask about our grasslands now? Because the ancient heritage of biological diversity under protection in our public parklands is at great risk of being lost. Over the past hundred and fifty or more years that biodiversity has been seriously compromised. Attempting to repair the East Bay grasslands after its long history of commercial use is a difficult and costly enterprise. Sustaining the effort will require determination, focused direction, and wise allocation of resources. CNPS wants the EBRPD to be successful in pursuing this goal of re-establishment (protection and improvement of grasslands for their native plant and native habitat value).

What’s the problem?

Over 90-95 percent of the grasslands is now covered with exotic weedy species of plants. The natives hang on, mostly, in very small numbers of plants, but their future is not assured. CNPS wants to improve the situation, reducing the risk of further loss, and significantly increase the cover of native flora in our grasslands. Can our native grasslands ever be completely “restored”? Most likely not, and CNPS is not seeking such an elusive goal. But, can we significantly improve the quantity of native flora in our local park grasslands? CNPS believes so.

There are many complicating technical issues related to attempts to improve the native plant quality of our local public park grasslands. Some of these issues interfere with and may even dictate against reaching some specified degree of re-establishment of native species. CNPS

recognizes these issues, and their potential impacts on seeking native plant improvements in our grasslands. However, CNPS also holds out hope that some important improvements can be made in spite of current constraints, whether they be technical or fiscal.

Before we get to the point in time when there really is no there there, we invite CNPS members to learn more about what is, and what should be—our Park District grassland heritage. Stay tuned.

Please contact us if you have questions or comments to offer regarding enhancing the native plant values of our East Bay Regional Park grasslands. To contact us and to read more on this topic, see <http://www.ebcnps.org/conservation/grasslands>.

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