



The Climate Reality Project[®]

LOS ANGELES CHAPTER

August 20, 2023

Members of the California Senate Appropriations Committee and AB 1573 Co-Authors

Senator Anthony J. Portantino, Senator Brian Jones, Senator Angelique Ashby, Senator Steven Bradford, Senator Kelly Seyarto, Senator Aisha Wahab, Senator Scott Wiener, Senator Toni Atkins, and Senator Henry Stern and Assemblymember Laura Friedman

Sent via email

RE: Restore Biodiversity Priorities to AB 1573

Honorable Legislators:

Most of California is contained within one of five Mediterranean climate biodiversity hot spots on the planet (the only one in the Western Hemisphere). We have an undeniable and unavoidable responsibility to the species of life with whom we share our state. In one generation our fire seasons have gone from a few months of the year to a year-round threat, placing even more pressure on the web of life in our state. We must stop thinking of urban landscapes as only ornamental and embrace the notion that now more than ever, our urban spaces must also function as a genetic biodiversity lifeboat to help preserve the very species we have placed in peril.

Having an arborist design your urban forest is akin to having your local mechanic plan regional transportation policy. No one could reasonably expect someone with no training in how larger systems work to make informed decisions about those systems. Yet, for more than a century, politicians have relied on arborists (aka urban foresters) as the experts for all matters related to public landscaping in our municipal spaces throughout the state. The result? We have filled our communities with non-native trees and landscaping plants from all over the world that are not part of our natural ecosystem. In the 470 square miles of Los Angeles, for example, fewer than 3% of the city's street trees are now native, and the arborists managing city tree planting programs continue to plant nearly exclusively non-native trees and landscaping plants. This is not the exception but rather the rule throughout most parts of the state at a time when species are disappearing at an alarming rate and we face a biodiversity crisis. California has experienced a startling decline in the populations of its native butterflies, moths, songbirds, bees, and other pollinators in recent decades, and with the additional pressures of climate change, we could lose 50% of all species by the end of the century.

Life evolves in a system of interconnected relationships. There is scientific consensus that native plants and trees are necessary and essential for the web of all life. Non-native plants do not provide sufficient ecosystem services to support biodiversity.

AB 1573 as originally drafted attempted to change the direction of our current path to destruction by requiring a very modest and easily satisfied eventual 75% native species in public and commercial landscaping projects. This is why groups like Climate Reality Project, USGBC-LA, California Native Plant Society, Theodore Payne Foundation, and others endorsed and have worked to support AB 1573. At the same time, the municipal urban forest lobbying groups California Urban Forests Council and California ReLeaf have vigorously opposed this measure, spreading disinformation about native species and the burden AB 1573 would place upon cities to simply plant the species of plant life that evolved here and thrived before their members started changing things in the name of improving upon the designs of nature. This latter campaign has met with success, resulting in amendments on August 16 that for all practical purposes have left AB 1573 gutted, which was the intention. Let's review a few of the California Urban Forests Council claims.

FALSE CLAIM #1: *If we are to meet California's climate goals, seriously restricting tree varieties in urbanized areas to a very limited number of native species will impact the overall sustainability of the urban forest.*

This is patently false and misleading. Native trees are every bit as successful at creating shade canopy, offsetting the urban heat island effect, cleaning our air, and providing all the beauty and other aesthetic value of any non-native species. Nothing in AB 1573 restricts planting to "a very limited number of native species." Quite the contrary. There are nearly 7,000 native plants in California—many not existing elsewhere. By even the most restrictive definitions, there are well over 50 California native tree species that work well as street trees. There are ample California native plants for every planting application. It's important to note here that most municipalities have preferred tree planting lists of fewer than 50

species (usually the same list of trees that are not native to California and have been traditionally used in landscaping around the globe with an outdated idea that cities are not part of nature). The original AB 1573 would result in more species being present in our cities as the habitat-supporting native trees are reintroduced.

FALSE CLAIM #2: Guided by the principle of planting “the right tree in the right place for the right reason,” urban tree selection is a nuanced process that considers multiple factors. While there are situations when a native tree aligns perfectly with this principle, it’s essential to recognize that diversity within urban forests contributes to their overall health and resilience.

Opponents of the original AB 1573 routinely conflate the idea of diversity of tree species—the number of species of trees planted—with biodiversity support from a tree—the number of species the tree will support in the ecosystem. Plant a native Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) in a city, and you have just created a centerpiece that supports over 500 species of life. Plant a non-native tree, and you are planting a comparative island of sterility within an established ecosystem. An exotic tropical Jacaranda tree (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*) might look pretty when it has thousands of purple blossoms in the spring, but you will never see our native butterflies servicing those blooms because our butterflies, like all insects, evolved to coexist with our native trees. There are many factors in determining the “right tree in the right place”, but the right tree is ALWAYS a native tree as nature has provided life to fill every possible niche and planting scenario. Believing that human beings know better than millions of years of evolution in an ecosystem is the height of hubris.

FALSE CLAIM #3: ...the one-size-fits-all approach mandated by Assembly Bill 1573 could potentially....(limit) the flexibility needed for optimal tree selection in specific urban contexts.

One of the best propaganda tactics is to accuse your opponent of committing your sins. The only “one-size-fits-all” principle in play here is the desire to continue planting the same 20 or so non-native tree species used everywhere. Most existing urban forestry departments would prefer to continue using established methods and practices, because they generally have limited experience with native species. Resistance to change is common in many areas, but that’s not a reason to avoid change.

FALSE CLAIM #4: (AB 1573’s)...potential to limit tree diversity in urban forests could inadvertently weaken their resilience in the face of changing climate conditions.

Again, tree species diversity has nothing to do with biodiversity, and AB 1573, as originally drafted, would help with both. California’s climate goals require nature-based solutions, and nature-based solutions require supporting existing ecosystems so they can adapt to climate change. Please do not take climate advice from the California Urban Forests Council, an arborist lobbying group that has no climate scientists and no biologists on its board.

Notably absent in any argument against natives is how they affect human health. Only native trees provide habitat support for butterflies and songbirds that are largely absent in cities like Los Angeles today as we have experienced a 90% loss of both in the last century. Seeing butterflies and hearing songbirds have well documented positive human health benefits—especially in underserved communities that often have limited green space.

OUR ASKS: *Please remove the August 16, 2023, amendments to AB 1573 that effectively give municipal forest managers a free pass on planting whatever they want. Require municipalities to plant native trees and restore the eventual 75% native minimum for all plantings while removing the unwarranted exemptions added in recent amendments, as they are already EASILY accommodated with the 25% allowance for non-native plantings.*

Our chapter cannot support the currently amended bill, as it does very little to support biodiversity and has effectively been turned into symbolic action by opponents. The originally crafted AB 1573 is a vital piece of legislation in efforts to mitigate our climate and biodiversity crises. Please help see that original vision through into action.

Respectfully,



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