

## Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee 2/28/2023 Oversight Hearing Opening Statement

Dr. Jun Bando, Executive Director, California Native Plant Society

### Introduction

Chairman Min, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss progress toward meeting California's 30x30 goal.

I'm here as the executive director of the California Native Plant Society, as an ecologist, and as a former policy practitioner who has spent much of my career working on complex global issues. Working with partners around the world has deepened my appreciation for the critical roles that leadership and unity of effort play in tackling society's most urgent challenges. And it has strengthened my belief in California's exceptionalism.

Today, California and the world face the twin, existential crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

In the past, biodiversity conservation was often seen as a luxury. But today, we broadly understand that protecting biodiversity and fighting climate change are two sides of the same coin. And they require solutions that engage all sectors of our government and society.

California is fortunate to have one of the most comprehensive and inclusive 30x30 strategies of any government in the world. That's largely due to the leadership of many who are here today. I thank Governor Newsom and his administration, our dedicated partners at the California Natural Resources Agency, our Legislative champions who fight to keep this issue at the forefront, and our many partners across the state who have brought us to this point today.

California's leadership was evident on the global stage in December, when the international community convened in Montreal for COP15, the 15<sup>th</sup> conference of the parties to the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity. Even as an observer, and not a signatory, to the convention, California provided much-needed leadership at a time when our federal government's presence was limited. The California Native Plant Society, CNPS, joined California's extended delegation to COP15, and we were greatly encouraged by the landmark biodiversity framework it produced, which included a global 30x30 target.

### Origins of 30x30

The 30x30 movement is rooted in broad scientific consensus that conserving 30% of lands and oceans, as a near-term goal toward 50%, is the minimum action required to curb extinction and avoid the worst impacts from climate change. A minimum of 30% and as much as 70% of lands and waters must be protected to safeguard biodiversity and stabilize the planet's climate. Conservationists hope that with 50% protection, we can save 80% of biodiversity. But we must act now and with great resolve.

Worldwide, more than 1 million species are at risk of extinction and wild vertebrate populations have dropped 69% since 1970. California is in one of the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots and we have the highest concentration of imperiled species in the United States.

Here, it's important to clarify that conservation itself isn't the ultimate goal. The protection of biodiversity, the integrity of the natural world, and understanding our place in nature – these are the outcomes we're pursuing, and they are interconnected. To protect biodiversity is to ensure our own survival.

This is the work of our lifetimes.

## Biodiversity - Why it matters and what it means to CNPS

Many of us are decades into this work. My organization, CNPS, was founded in 1965 to protect California's native plants. We also know that when we save native plants and their habitats, we save the myriad life that depends on them. The diversity of ecosystems underwrites their resilience – and in turn our human resilience.

Healthy forests are less vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. Intact wetlands help absorb flooding before it reaches communities. California's undisturbed deserts and other habitats store vast amounts of carbon.

For all of these reasons, CNPS has been a strong partner in statewide biodiversity efforts, contributing to the initial Biodiversity Roadmap, helping to lead the Power in Nature 30x30 coalition, participating in the California Biodiversity Network, and leading critical science to identify the most important plant areas we must protect to sustain biodiversity. And as Governor Newsom's executive order N-82-20 recognizes, people – of all backgrounds – are at the heart of this important work, and we must center equity in this work.

On behalf of CNPS and many partners and scientists involved in 30x30, I offer thoughts on three key areas we believe will help to advance the strategy this year.

### #1 – Prioritization

The first area is prioritization. California already leads most places, with 24% of our lands conserved at GAP 1 or GAP 2 status. To be conserved at GAP 1 or GAP 2 status means being permanently protected, with a management plan to maintain a natural or primarily natural state. California is applying a rigorous definition of conservation that my organization and more than 60 others in the Power in Nature coalition strongly support. Under this definition, we know that we must conserve 6 million additional acres in the next 7 years. But we haven't yet defined how to select that 6 million from the many more millions of acres that could qualify, or whether the acres currently protected are representative of California's plants, animals, and places.

The State's Pathways to 30x30 clearly frames our shared goals of biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and equitable access to nature. But clearly defined goals, objectives, and commitments are not enough. In the assessment of many scientists, the success of the strategy will also hinge on developing priorities for the inclusion of additional protected areas.

Unless California states its priorities for inclusion, the ad-hoc process that results in protecting areas primarily located away from marginalized communities will continue. We need to systematically identify which areas must be added to connect areas for plants and animals to live and move, and to provide people who are currently excluded from the benefits of biodiversity with access to essential nature.

Developing these priorities will require understanding where we have the greatest gaps in our biodiversity, climate, and equitable access goals. We will need to clarify the mix of protections we are seeking. What is the appropriate balance of acquisition, easements, land management or protection-level changes? What distributions are we seeking geographically, or by habitat type? Without that clarity in how we will achieve our shared goals, we are in danger of defaulting to whatever is "shovel ready" – putting the success of the strategy at risk.

The good news is that significant work is already underway that could inform the development of prioritization criteria. An example is the work the Power in Nature coalition is doing to aggregate and evaluate potential conservation projects. My organization also provided some suggested criteria in Appendix A of last year's CNPS comment letter on the Pathways Report.

## #2 – Best Available Science

In addition to defining priorities for inclusion, we need to apply the best available science. And that brings me to my second recommendation, which is to apply investments in science and data gathering to close key data gaps, including in biodiversity metrics.

40% of California's vegetation has yet to be mapped at the fine scale required to understand current plant communities and how they are changing in response to extreme wildfire, drought, and other climate impacts. Gaps in data on rare plants and animals also limit our ability to protect what's most threatened.

In addition to closing data gaps, continuing to strengthen interagency alignment will also improve our ability to leverage the best available science. This includes expanding work through cross-agency teams, building common data architecture, and developing shared terminology and priorities. Establishing minimum standards and policy incentives across agencies will enhance new protections and facilitate the application of best practices.

We also urge the State to continue clarifying the roles of individual departments and strengthening the connections between important initiatives like 30x30, Outdoors for All, and the Climate Smart Lands Strategy.

## #3 – Funding

Lastly, we're grateful to the Legislature and the Administration for last year's historic investments in California's climate package. Now is the time to double-down on those investments. But the January budget proposal tells another story. My third recommendation addresses funding.

CNPS and more than 60 other groups recently submitted a joint letter to Legislative and Administration leaders to communicate our deep concern over the disproportionate cuts to natural resources and conservation in the proposed 2023-24 budget. Funding for conservancies, capacity building, and vegetation mapping are a necessity, not a luxury, and we urge you to restore this funding.

We have work to do and we cannot accomplish it through a re-bucketing of business as usual. We must prioritize our efforts, apply the best available science, and invest the resources needed to fully implement this strategy. Our success is essential to the well-being of every person living in California, and to future generations.

My organization and many others are counting on you to set the conditions for success in meeting our 30x30 goals. Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to speak with you today.