POISON OAK MANAGEMENT ON THE SANTA LUCIA PRESERVE

January 2017

Introduction:

The Santa Lucia Preserve is a place of enduring natural beauty and resilient biodiversity, actively cared for and protected by a thriving community of people who treasure it. It is the goal of the Santa Lucia Conservancy to advance understanding of the interfaces between human residences and natural environments to benefit our community and society at large. One of those interfaces between 'people and nature' is a native shrub known as Poison Oak, which is a component of the flammable vegetation near people's homes, and also causes contact dermatitis in most people. Poison Oak is also a valuable part of our native plant communities, providing important food and habitat for wildlife. With its glossy spring leaves, delicate summer flowers, and rich fall color, Poison Oak also contributes importantly to the authentic natural beauty of The Preserve. Management of Poison Oak for human health and safety can be accomplished in a manner that avoids damage to desirable plants and animals, by following the guidelines below.

Poison Oak Management:

Within the Homelands of each residential property, owners can mow and spray poison oak without the approval of the Conservancy, provided broadleaf herbicides are used and the application is targeted to Poison Oak only. The Conservancy is available to consult with owners and their contractors on how to achieve the best results, including long-term Poison Oak control and techniques on how to prevent harm to desirable woodland plants, such as wildflowers, grasses, ferns, desirable shrubs and young trees.

In The Preserve's Openlands and Wildlands, Poison Oak management must be conducted in coordination with the Conservancy, and in a manner that protects native plants and wildlife. Openlands management should focus on: (1) areas that are used frequently by owners for passive recreation, such as along footpaths, (2) isolated patches, where the owners and the Conservancy agree to limit their growth and spread, and (3) within the fuel management zone around an existing structure, where the vegetation is mowed according to a Conservancy-approved fuel management plan. The Conservancy is available to guide these efforts. Wildlands management can be conducted by the Community Services District and the Ranch Club consistent with their mandates and reserved rights, and must be conducted in a manner that best protects the Protected Values of the Preserve.

Techniques:

Vegetation mowing: In woodlands and shrublands, Poison Oak is one of the primary components of the flammable vegetation, and can create 'ladder fuel' for flames to move into the tree canopy. To create defensible space around existing homes and other structures, woodland understory vegetation can be mowed according to a Conservancy-approved fuel management plan. Because the more flammable annual grasses often move into woodlands where herbicides have been used,

herbicide applications are rarely beneficial for maintaining defensible space in the oak woodlands around homes.

Herbicide applications: When Poison Oak management requires the use of herbicides, the goal is not simply to kill the Poison Oak, but also to preserve and retain the greatest number of desirable woodland plants possible. To accomplish both goals, we recommend an herbicide and an application window in Homelands, and require them in Openlands:

(1) The herbicide Milestone is one of the best herbicide formulations available for both controlling Poison Oak and also for retaining desirable woodland plants. However, even Milestone will scorch the leaves on pines and redwoods, and very young leaves of plants that are otherwise resistant. As with all chemicals, herbicides should be used according to their label, by a trained qualified spray applicator.

(2) Herbicide applications should be scheduled for September through October, or as the Poison Oak is starting to get its red fall color but before the leaves start to drop for the winter. Fall spraying can increase the effectiveness of the herbicide and spare desirable woodland plants.

(3) Spraying of Poison Oak in the Openlands requires the approval of the Conservancy. In order to protect native wildflowers and other sensitive resources, spraying can only occur in September or October, except in special circumstances such as emergency tree work or a public safety issue. The Conservancy will work with you and/or your contractor to meet these needs.

For more information, please contact Jason Mills, the Conservancy's Land Stewardship Manager, at jmills@slconservancy.org or (831) 626-8595 x104.

"Leaves of Three – Leave Them Be." Poison Oak is not a true oak, but a native plant related to poison ivy found in the eastern USA. Like poison ivy, it is characterized by bunches of three 'leaflets.' It is highly adaptable and grows as a shrub or vine in grassland, scrub and woodland habitats. Rich in phosphorus, calcium, and sulfur, its leaves and berries are an important food source for wildlife such as deer, squirrels and numerous bird species, which also use its dense plant structure for shelter. Many people suffer from a rash when they come into contact with the leaves or branches, or with pets that have brushed against the plant. Wildlife, livestock, and are pets rarely affected. Poison Oak flowers in the summer, with clusters of delicate white blossoms. The fruits are small green or white berries. In winter, its bare branches are still capable of triggering a rash. Poison Oak is a hardy plant that is one of the first to regrow after forest fires.

Spring *Summer* *Fall* *Winter*

Sources: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Virginia Tech 'vTree,' and the University of California IPM program.