

# Keynote Address Second Sudden Oak Death Science Symposium Monterey California, January 19, 2005

## Representative Lynn Woolsey, California's 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District

It is my great pleasure to be with you today at this impressive gathering of women and men of science. As a member of the House Science Committee, I am privileged to regularly hear from people from many disciplines in the scientific community. I so enjoy those hearings with not only brilliant, rigorous thinkers, but also people with a passion for the truth and compassion for all living things. I am certain that would describe the people in this room. How could it not be when your mission is, in the simplest terms, to save this state's, this country's, and perhaps a great part of the world's woodlands?

Sudden oak death (SOD), as you know, is somewhat of a misnomer. It does not come on suddenly and it doesn't just affect oaks. However, sudden oak death is a lot easier to pronounce than its cause, *Phytophthora ramorum*, so I am going to stick to calling it that or SOD.

As you may know, SOD was first identified in Marin County, which is my Congressional District, and its first victims were tanoak trees. Those of you who are not from central or northern California may not be familiar with tanoaks. They're not particularly attractive or commercially useful, but they are fast growing and hardy. If you were to cut down a tanoak, a thick bush of sprouts soon grows from the stump. You cannot generally use them for lumber because they split when dried, although when carefully kiln-dried tanoaks have been used for flooring. But they are not the kind of awe-inspiring tree like California's signature redwoods or black oaks. That is probably why when University of California's, Cooperative Extension, Horticultural Advisor Dr. Pavel Svihra first discovered dead and dying tanoaks in the rolling hills of Marin in 1995, he had a hard time convincing authorities that his findings were consequential.

It took years, and probably only when the growing fuel load of dead tanoaks threatened million dollar homes in the hills of Marin County, that the alarm was finally heard. In fact it was not until the year 2000 that major efforts got underway to combat this disease. That was the year that local governments concerned with the spread of this disease formed the Sudden Oak Death Coastal Council and that an interagency and interdisciplinary California Oak Mortality Task Force was formed. It was also the year that Marin County, led by Supervisor Cynthia Murray, convened a Sudden Oak Death Summit that brought together local, state and federal officials. The news was out, our trees were dying, and something needed to be done about it before our woodlands were devastated and this scourge spread beyond a few coast counties.

Four bills were introduced in the California legislature in 2000, and each year since, the State has contributed to the effort. The USDA Forest Service was aware of the problem, and people like the USDA Forest Service's Susan Frankel, who headed the Task Force, took key roles in coordinating local, state, and federal activities. But we needed to get a concerted research effort off the ground and

the funding was just not there. In 2000, I wrote several letters to the USDA Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture requesting increased money and resources for research. I remember that I scrawled the exclamation “**HELP**” at the bottom of one letter that I wrote to the Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman. Boy, did we need help! In 2000, the total amount of federal funding directed toward this effort was a measly \$85,000. Soon after the SOD Summit, the USDA began shifting funds from one account to another to help out, but still there were inadequate resources to mount a serious effort.

Clearly, the situation called for widening support. Ironically, the spread of the disease was of great help, because SOD became a problem beyond Northern California. Researchers, forestry and agricultural officials – and elected officials – soon found out that the disease was not limited to a few California counties. In fact, by 2002 the disease had worked its way up from Monterey County to Curry County, Oregon. It was also discovered that SOD not only infected tanoaks, but a wide variety of trees, including several oak species, big leaf maple, Douglas-fir, and even the venerable California redwood. In addition, the disease did not only affect woodlands. Last year it was found at one of the State’s largest commercial nurseries, infecting plants like rhododendrons and camellias.

In 2000, in collaboration with Senators Boxer and Feinstein, I worked to rally the California delegation, and then the larger Congress with the help of Congresspersons Mike Thompson, Sam Farr and Lois Capps. We doubled funding in 2001 and since then it’s been going upward. Last year, was the most successful yet in terms of funding. Over \$13 million was appropriated by Congress to fight sudden oak death, bringing the cumulative total to \$22 million. Perhaps just as important, Congress passed a bill by Congressman Max Burns, which I joined with 19 others in the House in co-sponsoring, directing the USDA to write a national plan to deal with SOD. The plan will compile research, surveys and data on sudden oak death; assess the risks of the disease; evaluate current control and management efforts; and recommend what actions need to be taken. The plan is not to be put on a shelf somewhere because the law specifies that it is to be implemented as soon as practicable after funds have been appropriated.

It has been ten years since sudden oak death was first found on a hillside in Mill Valley, California, and we are only at the beginning stages of learning how to deal with it. There have been promising developments, including success with small-scale treatment, and an indication that controlled burning could be used as a preventative measure. I am confident that this conference will herald other important findings.

We have also learned a few things on the policy level. First, how important it is to work from the bottom up. Only because Marin and other California Counties, and their elected officials, became engaged players did the issue rise to State and national importance. Imagine if discussion of sudden oak death was mainly confined to the experts at the USDA Forest Service or the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Despite their good intentions, it would still be considered one problem along with a dozen other blights affecting our woodlands. That is not to take anything away from the experts—but have you ever met the people from my district? Hand in hand with local involvement is the role of public education. Hundreds of stories about sudden oak death have appeared in newspapers and magazines, hundreds of hours of news reporting on TV and radio. Because the news got out, sudden oak death got on the public policy radar screen.

So what's ahead? Obviously more research and the development of a national plan is critical. But as we learn more, some difficult decisions are going to have to be made, both nationally and locally. Here are some tough ones to chew on:

- How much are we willing to spend to control and manage this disease? In prevention? In eradication? In dealing with the disease's aftermath?
- We also have some tough public policy questions. Should we limit public access to forests to stop the spread of the disease? How will that affect outdoor recreation and the economy that depends on it?
- Are quarantines effective and what impact will they have on commercial nurseries?
- Do we need to increase controlled burns and if we do, what will be the effect on air and water quality?

As a legislator, I know how tough it is to correctly identify a problem, find a solution, and then convince others that it is in their best interest to support that solution. I am counting on you to provide the solid scientific rationale to do what must be done.

You are not only fighting SOD, you are also pointing the way for sustaining our forests. Sudden oak death is one of the first major environmental challenges that we will face in a natural world made vulnerable to disease and other invasive species by increased international trade and travel. Your efforts will lead the way to earlier detection of plant pathogens, rapid response protocols, and new discoveries to cure disease and control their spread. So I eagerly look forward to any new information that will come out of this conference. I thank you and congratulate you on all the work you do, and look forward to continuing to be your partner in this effort.