
GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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Water Service Fee Increase Essential To Protect Grassland Landowners and Habitat

By now, all Grassland Water District landowners have received notices of a proposed water service fee increase. This is the first fee increase in the District since 1995.

The District is proposing a one-time surcharge of \$4.90 per acre to this year's fall flood-up water service fee to cover a shortfall in the current fiscal year budget. Beginning in 2005, the District is proposing a \$10.00 per acre increase in the fall flood-up fee.

Most of the proposed fee increase is attributable to the District's cost of complying with new federal and state regulatory and contractual requirements that have been imposed on District landowners and water users. Without this fee increase, the burden of complying with many of these new requirements will fall directly on landowners.

While the proposed fee increase is not insignificant, it must be viewed in relation to the increased costs that landowners would otherwise incur if the fee increase is not approved and the District is unable to continue its compliance activities on behalf of District landowners.

For example, the fee increase is necessary in part to offset the new costs to the District to satisfy the extensive monitoring and reporting obligations imposed by the Regional Water Quality Control Board's Conditional Waiver on water discharges from managed wetlands and other irrigated lands.

The District is developing a comprehensive compliance program on behalf of District water users in order to provide a less costly and burdensome means of meeting the Conditional Waiver's legal requirements. This compliance program has required additional staffing, monitoring equipment, and legal and technical support.

Without additional fee revenue, the District would simply be unable to continue this effort and District land-

owners would be required to directly assume responsibility for meeting the Regional Board's legal order. The California Farm Bureau has estimated that development of a Conditional Waiver compliance program by individual landowners would cost approximately \$50 to \$100 per acre per year for irrigated lands of 200 acres or less.

The District's water supply contract with the Bureau of Reclamation requires that the District comply with all state and federal laws and regulations that apply to water quality and water discharges. A failure to ensure compliance with the Conditional Waiver would threaten the District's long-term water contract.

That water supply contract also requires the preparation and implementation of water management plans to ensure the most efficient use of the water supplies provided under the contract. The District has been working with state and federal refuge managers and the Bureau to develop a District-

wide water management plan that will satisfy the federal requirements.

Without sufficient funding to complete and maintain this management plan, the cost and burden of developing water management plans would again fall on individual landowners and water users. Unless such management plans are in place, the federal water supplies provided to District lands would be in jeopardy.

The District is also engaged in a number of activities intended to acquire a more secure and predictable long-term Level 4 water supply. Some of this work is beginning to bear fruit, however, without a fee increase, this is the type of activity the District would be forced to abandon.

Over the last several years, the District has been successful in obtaining grant money to carry out capital improvement projects, including the construction of several new delivery and drainage facilities. The grant agree-

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Water District Prepares for Latest Possible Flood-Up

With the prospect of a late start to the waterfowl hunting season and to deal with threats of West Nile Virus, the Grassland Water District is preparing for the latest possible fall flood-up.

Scott Lower, assistant general manager for field operations, said his deliberations about when to begin flooding the 50,000-acre district were helped by the prospect of an Oct. 30 to waterfowl hunting season.

"The late start dovetails with the request from the Merced County Mosquito Abatement District to hold off flooding as long as we can," Lower said. "We normally begin flooding in early September. This year we will start moving water some time around Sept. 15 to 20, about 10 days later than in previous years. We're doing all we can to prevent the spread of West Nile Virus."

He said there would be early water for pintail, which arrived en masse on Aug. 10. Volta Wildlife Area traditionally takes early water and that state-run complex has already been flooded for the pintail. In addition, there is a new 200-acre permanent marsh adjacent to Volta that has already received water.

"We've got private clubs taking early water, too," Lower said. "These clubs include the Hollister and Gustine on the north end of the district, and the Clear Lake, Sweetwater, and Santa Cruz clubs south of Highway 152. There is ample water for pintail and other early arrivals."

To comply with Mosquito Abatement, the Grasslands Water District is refraining from applying water to ponds within a 3- to 4-mile radius of Dos Palos, Los Banos, and Gustine. There-

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Grassland Today

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The Grassland Water District and the Grassland Resource Conservation District are dedicated to providing water and habitat protection for waterfowl, shorebirds, plants and other wildlife and in promoting associated educational and recreational opportunities.

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Co-chairs — **Dennis Hollingsworth** (R-Riverside) and **Lois Wolk** (D-Davis) led the first Outdoor Sporting Caucus dinner, Aug. 18. At right is **Dino Cortopassi** of Stockton, who hosted the bipartisan event for the California State Legislature.

Outdoor Sporting Caucus Attracts Legislators

A bipartisan group of the California Legislature—members of the state Senate and Assembly—met in Sacramento Aug. 18 at the first Outdoor Sporting Caucus Dinner. Approximately 20 members of the Senate and Assembly attended the event organized by the California Waterfowl Association and hosted by Dino Cortopassi of Stockton. In addition to elected officials, the gathering blended consumptive and non-consumptive groups that vowed to work together to protect and promote recreational activities in the wild.

Co-chairs of the Outdoor Sporting Caucus are Senator Dennis Hollingsworth (R-Riverside) and Assemblywoman Lois Wolk (D-Davis). They said the caucus would be able to further the understanding and acceptance of outdoor activities throughout the state and provide a bipartisan voice for outdoor issues in the state Legislature.

In a joint statement, Hollingsworth and Wolk said, “The Outdoor Sporting Caucus will be the only state legislative sporting caucus to include emphasis on outdoor activities in addition to hunting, fishing, and shooting sports.” They noted recreational activities such as birding, fishing, hunting, and canoeing add approximately \$2.6 billion to California’s economy each year.

“The state Outdoor Sporting Caucus is modeled after the Congressional Sportsmen’s Caucus,” said Brad Rowse of Washington, D.C. “It began just 15

years ago and now boasts 324 members of the U.S. House and Assembly.”

Rowse said approximately 2,700 pieces of legislation are introduced each year that attack sportsmen across the U.S. “The caucus is a place where representatives and senators can go and find bipartisan support for our traditional outdoor pursuits,” he said.

Ryan Brodrick, director of the state Department of Fish and Game, said the caucus is important because it will “cross political lines.”

“Its focus will be on public access and multiple use habitat management for wildlife and fisheries that will allow us to work together,” Brodrick said.

Mike Chrisman, secretary of the state Resources Agency, thanked CWA, Senator Hollingsworth, and Assemblywoman Wolk for their leadership. “This is an extremely important effort that will hopefully bridge the gap between our rural and urban citizens.”

Assemblywoman Wolk said Californians have always had a “special relationship” to the outdoors. “With this caucus we must protect our open spaces, wild lands, and access.”

Senator Hollingsworth said, “It is our mission to be a united voice for these activities that take place outdoors in the wild—both consumptive and non-consumptive—and to preserve the traditional rights of citizens to hunt, fish, and pursue other outdoor activities.”



Poetry in flight — The first bands of pintail began arriving Aug. 10 in the Grasslands. Results of a four-year study reveal unknown facts about them. Photo by Ron Morris.

Refuge Water Purchase

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intends to purchase up to 8,500 acre-feet of water annually from the Stevinson Water District in Merced County. The purchase will be used to help meet water needs of the fledgling East Bear Creek Unit of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge.

Kim Forrest, complex leader of San Luis NWR, said the newly acquired water would be used after waterfowl hunting season or in the summer to control invasive plants.

“We do not intend to flood-up the East Bear Creek Unit during the fall waterfowl hunting season,” Forrest said. “No fall flooding will take place until the unit is open to the public and a hunting program on the refuge is in place.”

For information about the management of East Bear Creek, contact Forrest at (209) 826-3508.

Satellite Telemetry Study on Pintail Reveals Critical Data About Nomadic Species

Results of a landmark, four-year study, “Tracking Spring Migration of Northern Pintail with Satellite Telemetry,” have been released by the Western Ecological Research Center of the U.S. Geological Survey headquartered in Dixon, California.

The study tracked spring migration of pintails wintering in the Central Valley of California, Playa Lakes and Gulf Coast regions of Texas, south-central New Mexico, and Mexico. Partners in the project included Ducks Unlimited, California Waterfowl Association, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, Ducks Unlimited Canada, and the Western Ecological Research Center.

The study was underwritten by a grant from Tuscan Research Institute of Las Vegas and its Mandeville Island field station in the California Delta.

USGS wildlife research biologist Michael Miller said objectives included determination of: 1. Spring migration routes, stopover areas, and timing of migration; 2. Ultimate nesting and post-nesting distribution; 3. Efficiency of the annual May Survey to account for pintails; 4. Exposure to lakes with perennial botulism problems; and 5. Habitat types used and activities engaged in by pintails at stopover sites.

Among study’s findings:

- California pintails dispersed widely within the Central Valley after tagging and release, and migration out of the valley occurred between February and April, with the most-concentrated period between late February and mid-March.

- Between 77 to 87 percent of all California pintail with platform transmitting terminals (PTT) first stopped in the southern Oregon-northeastern California region (SONEC) after migrating north from the Central Valley.

- California PTT pintails used five routes or strategies heading north, including direct to Alaska across the Pacific Ocean; direct to inland Canada without stopping; indirect to inland Canada with one or more stopovers; coastal and other inland routes.

- Pintail residency time in SONEC depended upon their migration strategy. For example: Pintails that migrated directly to Alaska stayed in SONEC averages of 53 to 63 days annually before departing.

- Distribution of PTT-tagged hens was related to wetland conditions in the Prairie Pothole Region in the southern prairies of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and the Dakotas and eastern Montana. They flew to many places including Alaska, Yukon, Northwest

Territories, and even Russia, when they didn’t choose the prairies.

- The annual May Survey did not efficiently account for pintails, especially those from California that migrated along routes west of the mid-continent region. An estimated 22 percent of California PTT-tagged pintails and, theoretically, the unmarked population they represented, may have been missed during the May Survey of 2000, compared to 41 percent in 2001, 48 percent in 2002, and 23 percent in 2003.

- Average migration flight speeds of individual PTT-tagged pintails ranged from 28 to 72 miles per hour, with an average speed of 42 miles per hour. The longest apparent non-stop flight for a California PTT-tagged pintail was from Goose Lake on the California-Oregon border to the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska, a distance of 1,818 miles over the ocean.

- During all time periods of spring migrations, feeding was the most important activity, making up 50 percent of the day. Resting and sleeping took up 25 percent of the day.

Miller said the web site, www.werc.usgs.gov/pinsat, was used by large numbers of viewers throughout the four-year project. He said visitors to the Western Ecological Research Center’s web site increased threefold when the Pinsat page was added.

Wetland Areas to Minimize Risks of West Nile Virus

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is coordinating land flooding plans between local mosquito abatement and vector control districts and major wetland areas to address mosquito control efforts on state-managed areas in preparation for the arrival of migrating waterfowl and other marsh-dependent birds. These efforts should help minimize mosquito populations and reduce the threat of mosquitoes that carry the West Nile virus on state-managed lands.

As part of the agreements with vector control districts, DFG wetland managers will help implement established practices that can reduce mosquito populations. DFG wetland managers will alert the local districts when they begin flood-up operations and provide the districts with maps of the affected regions.

“Fish and Game is taking a proactive approach in working with local agencies and organizations in reducing the risk of West Nile virus on our seasonal wetland areas,” DFG Director Ryan Brodrick said. “While funding has been severely reduced for land management activities, the Department remains committed to reducing mosquito populations on DFG lands while meeting its legal mandates to provide habitat for migratory birds and rare, threatened, and endangered species.”

DFG estimates that more than seven million waterfowl and other water birds utilize the Central Valley during migration or in winter. The Central Valley provides wintering habitat for 60 percent of all waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway, which stretches from Alaska to Mexico.

West Nile Hot Line

Allen Inman of the Merced County Abatement District has been extremely helpful to wetlands owners and the Grassland Water District in preparing for and preventing the spread of the West Nile Virus.

Inman told participants at the annual Grassland Landowners Meeting that he is available for technical assistance and consultation about West Nile—including spraying. To contact Inman, call him toll-free at (800) 622-3242.

Currently, about 70 agencies throughout the state do some form of mosquito control. Fifty-three agencies are members of a group called Mosquito and Vector Control Association of California (MVCAC).

DFG began working with the MVCAC more than a year ago to address potential conflicts between state lands managed for waterfowl and the mosquitoes that reproduce on those lands. The work has developed a series of habitat-based, best management practices (BMPs) for mosquito prevention. Wetland areas in Fresno, Merced, Solano, and Yolo counties have implemented many of these practices. Some of the proactive steps taken by the Department at these locations include:

- Delaying the flooding of wetlands, when possible, to coincide with the timing of annual migration of waterfowl and shorebirds. Generally, flood-up starts in September and stretches to early winter. By coordinating the flood-up as bird populations increase, the technique provides new wetland habitats for wildlife and delays the flooding of some wetlands until later in the year, when mosquito production declines. DFG continues to work with mosquito and vector control agencies to identify habitats near urban areas or those that have a history of mosquito production for delayed flooding.

- Flooding wetlands, when required, as quickly as possible to deter multiple hatches of mosquitoes. Wetland that is flooded quickly and to a stable level ensures that mosquito hatches mature at the same time. Mosquito abatement can then occur at one time to save valuable resources and time. A number of wildlife areas have begun implementing projects to upgrade the output of wells and pumps, and the capacity of canals to facilitate faster flood-up.

- Maintaining stable water levels with good water circulation, allowing wildlife area managers to offset water lost to evaporation and seepage, and avoiding stagnant conditions conducive to mosquito production.

- Directing more attention to inspections and replacement of water control structures, gates, and pipes to ensure that water is only applied when and where desired for wetland flooding.

Grassland Notes

- **Mosquito Control Guide** – The Central Valley Joint Venture, working with the California Department of Fish and Game, has produced “A Technical Guide to Best Management Practices for Mosquito Control in Managed Wetlands.” CVJV spokesperson Ruth Ostroff said the guide should be useful to wetlands managers in the Grasslands, especially in light of the arrival of West Nile Virus. Copies of the guide are available free by writing to Ostroff at CVJV, 2800 Cottage Way, W-2610, Sacramento, CA 95825. Call (916) 414-6460. The guide may be viewed on line at www.sfbayjv.org/wnv.htm#documents.

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- **New Shot Approved** – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has approved three new non-toxic shot types—tungsten-bronze-iron, tungsten-iron, and tungsten-tin-bismuth—for waterfowl hunting. The approval brings to 10 the number of non-toxic shot types available to waterfowl hunters. Efforts to phase out lead shot began in the 1970s and a nationwide ban was put in place in 1991.

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- **Remarkable Success** – A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study has determined the banning of toxic lead shot in 1991 has been an extremely positive move for wildlife. Six years after the ban on lead shot, researchers estimated a 64-percent reduction in lead poisoning deaths of surveyed mallard ducks and a 78-percent decline on ingestion of lead pellets.

* * *

- **Waterfowl Harvest Rises** – More than 13.4 million ducks were harvested in the U.S. during the 2003–2004 season, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In the Pacific Flyway, hunters bagged nearly 2.4 million ducks last season, up from nearly 2.3 million in 2002. The number of geese taken, nearly 440,000, was up from 362,000 the previous year. Complete results of waterfowl hunter activity and harvest estimates are available on line at <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/reports/reports.html>.

Fee Increase. . . (from page 1)

ments require the District to carry out intensive maintenance activities in order to keep these facilities functioning properly.

The District's current maintenance staff, responsible for the upkeep of more than 120 miles of canals, consists of two full-time employees and one seasonal worker. That is four fewer full-time employees and 2 fewer seasonal workers than the District employed 5 years ago. Additional maintenance personnel and equipment, as well as an additional administrative staff person, are needed if we are to meet not only the requirements of the grant agreements, but our obligation to provide efficient service to our landowners.

Whenever possible, the District will continue to work with the Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to cost-share on projects and personnel to cut costs.

However, these new regulatory and contractual costs are largely unavoidable and are not subject to the kind of control that applies to more traditional costs of providing service. They are also over and above the general increases in inflation and the consumer price index that have affected all aspects of District operations.

Grassland area landowners, working through the District, have succeeded in obtaining a long-term water supply contract, protecting the core habitat from major urban encroachment, and transforming our area into one of the most viable waterfowl hunting areas left in the state. With new threats of major urban encroachment into the habitat from several fronts, continuing difficulty in securing a predictable Level 4 water supply, and legislative proposals undermining our hunting rights, this will be an on-going struggle. This first fee increase in almost ten years is essential to protecting and maintaining the tremendous investment we all have in this area.

The District will hold a hearing on the proposed fee increase on September 14, 2004, at 2:00 p.m., at the Los Banos Sportsman's Association, 13989 Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, California. For more information you can contact the District at 209-826-5188.

2004/05 Waterfowl Hunting Regulations
adopted by the Fish and Game Commission, August 27, 2004

Duck Recommendations				Goose Recommendations			
Zone	Duck Season Dates	Days	Bag Limits (a)	Zone	Goose Season Dates	Days	Bag Limits (b)
Northeastern - all ducks except pintail & canvasback	Oct. 9 - Jan. 9	93	7/5/1	Northeastern	Oct. 9 - Jan. 16	100	3/3/2/1
Pintail	Oct. 9 - Dec. 7 Oct. 30 -	60	1				
Canvasback	Dec. 7 & Dec. 20 - Jan. 9	60	1				
Balance of State - all ducks except pintail & canvasback	Oct. 30 - Jan. 30	93	7/5/1	Balance of State	Oct. 30 - Jan. 30 *see below	100	3/3/3/1
Pintail	Oct. 30 - Nov. 7 & Dec. 11 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Canvasback	Dec. 2 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Southern California - all ducks except pintail & canvasback	Oct. 23 - Jan. 30	100	7/5/1	Southern California	Oct. 23 - Jan. 30	100	5/3/3/1
Pintail	Oct. 23 - Oct. 31 & Dec. 11 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Canvasback	Dec. 2 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Southern San Joaquin - all ducks except pintail & canvasback	Oct. 23 - Nov. 13 & Nov. 20 - Jan. 30	94	7/5/1	Southern San Joaquin	Oct. 30 - Jan. 30	100	3/3/3/1
Pintail	Oct. 23 - Oct. 31 & Dec. 11 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Canvasback	Dec. 2 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Colorado River - all ducks except pintail & canvasback	Oct. 22 - Jan. 30	101	7/7/2	Colorado River	Oct. 22 - Jan. 30	101	6/3/3
Pintail	Dec. 2 - Jan. 30	60	1				
Canvasback	Dec. 2 - Jan. 30	60	1				

Youth Hunts: NE = Sept. 25 & 26. BOS, SoCal, SSJ = Feb. 5 & 6. Col Riv = Feb. 5

*EXCEPT in the Sacramento Valley (West) Special Management Area where the white-fronted goose season will open Oct. 30 through Dec. 14 and the bag limit is only 2 white-fronted geese.

a) Duck Bag Limits: 7 ducks/up to 5 mallards/but not more than 1 hen mallard, 1 pintail, 1 canvasback, 2 redhead, 4 scaup

b) Goose Bag Limits: overall goose bag/white goose bag/dard goose bag/small Canada goose

Latest Possible Flood-Up. . . (from page 1)

fore, clubs receiving early water will be able to flood only certain ponds, not their entire complex.

For example, the Gustine Club may only take water south of Gun Club Road. The rest of their lands must wait until later.

“Because we are flooding only specific units outside of the centers of population, it makes it easier for Mosquito Abatement to check for West Nile Virus and to spray.” Lower said. “Mosquito Abatement doesn’t have to hunt for water. We know exactly where it is.”

Statewide, 41 of California’s 58 counties have identified West Nile. As of August. 20, 148 Californians had contacted the virus and five deaths had been attributed to it.

While there is no human vaccine, there is a vaccine for horses. Transmission of the virus to mammals, including humans, occurs through mosquito bites. Mosquito Abatement officials encourage Grassland landowners to take several precautions to minimize the risk of bites. They include applying insect repellent containing the ingredient DEET, wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts outdoors, and remaining inside at dawn and the first two hours after sunset.

Most infected individuals do not experience symptoms. Approximately 10 to 15 percent suffer mild or moderate symptoms such as fever, headache, and body aches. Typically, fewer than 1 percent will develop serious neurological illness or death, officials say.

Fall Flood-Up Tips

As always, the Grassland Water District expects all water users to use good, sound, best management practices when filling their clubs. Check all structures and intake ditches to make sure that they are free of silt, vegetation, or debris. Watch your water closely to prevent excess spillage. A club should have no more than 1 to 2 inches of water spilling over its discharge structure.

Stay in touch with your canal tender and keep him informed of your progress. North Grasslands canal tender is Tim Poole, (209) 704-5184; South Grasslands canal tender is Rick Rasmussen, (209) 704-5186.

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