

# GRASSLAND TODAY

## The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

Vol. 14, No. 5

[www.grasslandwetlands.com](http://www.grasslandwetlands.com)

September/October 2004

### *Fall Flood-Up Surcharge is First Increase for Water Service Since 1995*

Grassland Water District directors at a public hearing Sept. 14 voted unanimously to assess landowners a fall flood-up fee surcharge of \$4.90 per acre this year, the first water service increase since 1995. The surcharge was added to landowner invoices to help overcome a projected GWD budget deficit of \$245,000.

In the coming 2005–2006 water year, the GWD will raise water service fees by \$10 an acre to a total of \$22 per acre.

“The increasing number and complexity of state and federal regulatory programs affecting district operations are unprecedented and have added a substantial new component to our operational costs,” said Don Marciochi, general manager of the GWD. “The bottom line is that we’re being made to meet more and more regulations and that involves paying for more legal and technical services.”

Marciochi cited the Regional Water Quality Control Board’s Conditional Waiver of Waste Discharge Requirements for Discharges from Irrigated Lands and federal permits for aquatic herbicides as examples of recent regulations that are driving the costs to operate skyward for the GWD.

He said the fall flood-up surcharge, due and payable within 60 days of invoice, will be applied to more than 50,000 acres of wetlands and associated wildlife habitat that receives water from the district.

Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager for the GWD, said 8 percent of district landowners protested the fee hikes. “We haven’t raised water service fees in 10 years,” she said. “However, the costs of complying with government mandates forced us to increase fees.”

Approximately 30 landowners attended the public hearing and most didn’t question the need for the district to raise fees to meet operational costs. But some objected to the timing of the rate hike, saying their budgets were

previously set and could not recover the added costs for water service that was being passed on to them.

Others asked why the GWD was even required to test drainage water and comply with the Conditional Waiver since landowners are maintaining critical wetlands for wildlife and not using pesticides, fertilizers and other products commonly used in for-profit production agriculture.

Dan Cardozo, attorney for the GWD, said the district has argued that point to the Regional Water Quality Control Board but was told it would have to

provide test results of water drained from wetlands, just the same as agriculture. “We must provide test results taken on our district’s drain water before any separate waiver could be considered in the future,” Cardozo said.

The GWD has been able to strike a separate agreement with the Westside San Joaquin River Watershed Coalition, a group formed on behalf of owners and lessors of thousands of acres of Central Valley land, to meet the regional board’s drainage discharge requirements.

Under that agreement, part of the

*(Continued, page 3)*



*Corralled* — California Waterfowl Association technicians trapped and banded ducks in the Grasslands this past summer. Data from returned bands provides information on local production, habitat preferences, and distribution.

### *CWA Bands Nearly 1,000 Ducks*

California Waterfowl Association has recently wrapped up its 16<sup>th</sup> season of Grasslands bait trapping, which started in late June and ended in early August. Results from the bait trapping included 932 mallards (266 adults and 694 first year birds), 26 cinnamon teal, 10 gadwall, 6 ruddy duck, 4 wood duck, 3 redhead, and 1 northern pintail.

CWA would like to extend a special thanks to Roger Miller and club mem-

bers of the Underwood Duck Club for providing housing accommodations for the bait trapping crew.

CWA would also like to thank the following for their participation: Web-foot Development Company, Mesquite Sportsmen’s Club, Frasher Farms, Madrone Land and Cattle, Manteca Land Company, California Department of Fish and Game, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Grassland Water District.

## Grassland Today

The bi-monthly newsletter of the Grassland Water District and the Grassland Resource Conservation District, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Rd., Los Banos 93635.

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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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## Important Canal and Weir Safety Notice

Once again, the Board of Directors and staff of the Grassland Water District are asking landowners and club members to use extra safety precautions with children and pets around canals and weirs. Water districts throughout the state are continuing to experience tremendous problems with water hyacinth, primrose, and other aquatic vegetation. Water hyacinth and primrose tend to gather in large amounts near weirs and, together, create a thick mass of plant growth on top of and below the surface of the water. Hyacinth (also known as "water lilies") floats on top of the water and may stack one on top of the other in front of and behind weirs, creating a matted blanket on the surface of the water. Primrose has a long, tangled mass of roots that extends well below the surface. In some areas, primrose has grown across canals, covering the entire surface from one side to the other.

The District is currently working to

clean out as much vegetation as possible using mechanical means, but it is a slow process. And, although hyacinth and primrose may look pretty on top of the water and water pouring over weir boards may be fascinating to watch, all can be deadly to humans and pets that fall or swim in the canals. Because waterfowl season is just around the corner, many hunters are taking their dogs to their clubs. Due to their love of water, retrievers are especially vulnerable! Do not allow them to go into the canals.

Please share this information with all your owners, members, hunters, managers, etc. Let's make the season a safe one.

If you have any questions or comments, please call Scott Lower at the GWD office, (209) 826-5188 or on his cellular phone, (209) 704-5187, or contact the water tender in your area: North Grassland – Tim Poole, (209) 704-5184; South Grassland – Rick Rasmussen, (209) 704-5186.

## CWA's Egg Salvage Kicks Off

Byron Hisey, Hollister Club member and CWA Director, is a man of conviction and action. He is excited about the California Waterfowl Association's new Mallard Legacy Program that includes creating 80,000 acres of nesting habitat and breeding wetlands within the state and salvaging duck eggs that might otherwise be lost during agricultural harvesting.

"I believe egg salvaging is a tool of awareness that can help reach the goals of the Mallard Legacy Program," he said. "It isn't the final answer, but it is a way to save eggs and raise birds that otherwise would be destroyed."

This past spring Hisey, a resident of Newman, enlisted the help of a hay chopper that was harvesting oats. He convinced the operator to collect eggs that would have been mowed by haying operations. In just 12 days of harvesting hay, the operator picked up more than 200 eggs from Grassland Area fields.

"One of the main early crops here in Merced County is winter oats, which are cut and chopped and used as silage for cattle," Hisey said. "The timing for

nesting ducks couldn't be worse. The winter oats are ready to be harvested just as hens have taken to these fields, where they are inadvertently destroyed.

"My question is," Hisey continued, "if 200 eggs can be saved by just one chopper, how many eggs could they get if the program were expanded?"

With the help of volunteers, he gathered the salvaged eggs and transported them to Rancho Esquon near Durham, in the Sacramento Valley, where Ken Hofmann has built a state-of-the-art facility for hatching eggs and growing the young birds. After the birds become fully feathered in 5 to 6 weeks, they are released into wild brood ponds.

"I was given 50 of these young, almost-to-flight mallards and brought them back to the Hollister Gun Club, where they were released," Hisey said. "All of the birds were banded."

He pointed out that all of these raised birds would have been destroyed before hatching if their eggs hadn't been saved.

"This program isn't the final answer

*(Continued, page 3)*

## 920 Acre Expansion Added to Volta Wildlife Area

Approximately 920 acres have been added to the Volta Wildlife Area on the western edge of the Grasslands, according to Bill Cook, manager of the Los Banos Wildlife Area Complex. Most of the newly acquired property will remain dry for the coming waterfowl hunting season.

The expansion includes two parcels—800 acres north of the existing wildlife area and 120 acres adjacent to the northwest boundary of the wildlife area.

Of the 800 acres, slightly more than 200 acres fall within the Grassland Water District and received summer water for shorebirds and locally-nesting ducks. However, there isn't any public access.

"This 200 acres will remain flooded during the hunting season," Cook said. "It has dense cattails and might attract some birds. We just don't know. I don't anticipate hunting it this year."

Cook said the remaining 600 acres are dry and are not within either the Grassland Resource Conservation Dis-

trict nor the Grassland Water District. "This area is dry and I anticipate them to be dry next year, too, unless the Department of Fish and Game can expand the Volta contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to expand the use of the existing Volta water allotment."

Cook said negotiations with the BOR to amend the contract are "ongoing." He also said there were access problems to overcome with neighboring private duck clubs. "I don't know if they'll want public and private hunters using the same access road," he said.

The other parcel, 120 acres, is dry and won't be flooded this year. Cook said the new acquisition needs infrastructure work on levees so nearby roads aren't flooded.

"We'll try to fix the problems and flood this area for the 2005-2006 hunting season," Cook said. "There are already four sets of blinds on the land and we anticipate creating Volta's first spaced-blind area when the property is fully restored and flooded."

## Water Service Fee

### Increase. . . (from page 1)

GWD's contributions to the coalition's water monitoring and testing programs are in-kind, which will save the district "thousands of dollars."

The GWD, along with the state Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, make up the Wetland Subarea within the Westside San Joaquin River Watershed Coalition. The Wetland Subarea will maintain four discharge-monitoring sites and take eight agricultural period monthly samples, four wetland period monthly samplings and two storm water period monthly samples, as part of the agreement.

The public hearing on the proposed GWD fee increase was pursuant to provisions in Proposition 218 that requires property owners be allowed to give input prior to the "imposition of general taxes, assessments and certain service fees."

Notice of the proposed increases was mailed to property owners in late July. Increases were also discussed at the GWD landowners meeting in May and in two issues of the district's newsletter, *Grassland Today*.

## Egg Salvage. . . (from page 2)

for improving local duck production, but it can be used to make people aware of the issues," Hisey said.

For information about CWA's Mallard Legacy Program, call (916) 648-1406.

## RAMSAR Nominee

The Grasslands Ecological Area has been nominated to the list of Wetlands of International Importance under the auspices of the 1971 Convention on Wetlands held at Ramsar, Iran. Inclusion on the list is based on scientific data on the national and international level. Applications to RAMSAR have already been delivered to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials in Washington, D.C.

If approved, the designation will not incumber landowners or force them to change the way they choose to manage their own property. "There are no strings attached," said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos.

Already the Grasslands has been recognized by experts in the field for its very important wildlife resource values.

## Grassland Notes

• **Youth Hunters Wanted** — Calling all boys and girls 15 years and under who hold a valid Junior Hunting License. Special "after season" Youth Waterfowl Hunts will take place Feb. 5-6, 2005 on federal national wildlife refuges and state wildlife areas. There are no fees to take part. "Last year the public areas were less than half-full," said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos. "The turnout was a real disappointment." She said all Merced County public areas will be open and encourages adults to bring youth to these special hunts. Information: Loni Hext, Los Banos Wildlife Area at (209) 826-0463.

\* \* \*

• **Altamont Backed for Bullet Train** — A high-speed rail network linking California's major cities should consider the Altamont Pass as a route between the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Valley, rail authority staff recently recommended to its board. The 700-mile system, with 200 miles-per-hour trains, would cost \$33 billion to \$37 billion and carry as many as 68 million passengers a year by 2020. The sharpest debate over the project has centered on how to get the trains through coastal mountains. Planners initially favored a southerly San Francisco Bay route out of San Jose, along the Pacheco Pass and through the Grassland wetlands next to Henry Miller Avenue. That route was protested by a coalition of state and federal agencies and the Grassland Water and Resource Conservation districts that cited impacts to canals, waterways and millions of migratory birds that winter in the 170,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area. The rail project's 2,000-page environmental report is under review and significant changes are expected. Rail service would not begin before 2013 at the earliest. Information: San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex at (209) 826-3508.

\* \* \*

• **CWA Dinner** — The 18th Los Banos Banquet is Nov. 5 at the Fairgrounds, corner of 4th and F Streets. Hosted bar at 6 p.m., dinner at 7:30 p.m. Donation: \$30. Call GWD for tickets or information: (209) 826-5188.

# Waterfowl Hunting Times for 2004-2005 Season Grasslands of Merced County

*Provided by the California Department of Fish and Game.*

	Start	Stop		Start	Stop
<b>October</b>			<b>December (cont.)</b>		
Sat 30	6:56	6:07	Sat 25	6:44	4:52
Sun 31**	5:57	5:06	Sun 26	6:45	4:53
<b>November</b>			Wed 29	6:46	4:55
Wed 3	6:00	5:03	<b>January 2005</b>		
Sat 6	6:03	5:00	Sat 1	6:47	4:58
Sun 7	6:04	5:00	Sun 2	6:47	4:58
Wed 10	6:07	4:57	Wed 5	6:47	5:01
Sat 13	6:11	4:54	Sat 8	6:47	5:04
Sun 14	6:12	4:55	Sun 9	6:47	5:05
Wed 17	6:15	4:52	Wed 12	6:47	5:08
Sat 20	6:18	4:50	Sat 15	6:46	5:11
Sun 21	6:19	4:50	Sun 16	6:45	5:12
Wed 24	6:22	4:48	Wed 19	6:44	5:15
Sat 27	6:25	4:47	Sat 22	6:43	5:18
Sun 28	6:26	4:47	Sun 23	6:42	5:19
<b>December</b>			Wed 26	6:40	5:22
Wed 1	6:29	4:47	Sat 29	6:38	5:25
Sat 4	6:31	4:46	Sun 30***	6:37	5:27
Sun 5	6:32	4:46	<b>Junior Waterfowl Hunts for boys and girls 15 years and under</b>		
Wed 8	6:35	4:46	<b>February</b>		
Sat 11	6:37	4:47	Sat 5	6:32	5:33
Sun 12	6:38	4:47	Sun 6	6:31	5:34
Wed 15	6:40	4:48	<b>Of Special Note</b>		
Sat 18	6:42	4:49	**End of Daylight Savings Time		
Sun 19	6:42	4:49	***Final Day of Waterfowl Hunting Season		
Wed 22	6:44	4:51			

## ***Dogs Not As Susceptible to West Nile Virus According to State Official***

For whatever reasons, the West Nile virus outbreak doesn't seem to have an impact on dogs like it does on horses or birds.

"Canines aren't affected that severely," said Bill Cook, manager of the Los Banos Wildlife Area Complex. "In talking with local mosquito abatement

officials, they don't know why some animals and birds are more susceptible than others to the virus. Cattle aren't bothered by the virus as much, either."

Cook said mosquitoes that carry the West Nile virus seem to be most active at night. Daytime mosquitoes aren't as

lethal, though they can carry the disease, too.

"This is good news for duck hunters who were concerned about how West Nile virus might affect their retrievers," Cook said. "From what we understand, dogs aren't affected very much."

# Waterfowl Hunting Regulations for the Balance of State Zone Including the Grasslands of Merced County

- **Major Changes:** The mallard limit has been reduced to five per day, with no more than one hen.

One additional dark goose can be taken per day

- **2004–2005 Duck and Goose Hunting Seasons** (93-straight days)

October 30, 2004 through Jan. 30, 2005

*Exceptions:* Pintail, Oct. 30–Nov. 7 and Dec. 11–Jan. 30 (60-day split)

Canvasback, Dec. 2–Jan. 30 (60-straight days)

- **Mechanical Decoys**

Spinning wing decoys may be used from Dec. 1–Jan. 30

- **Limit on Ducks**

Seven per day

Daily bag may contain not more than five mallards of which one may be a hen mallard; one pintail; four scaup; two redheads; one canvasback.

Possession limit is double the daily bag after opening day.

- **Limit on Geese**

Three per day

Daily bag may contain not more than one small Canada goose, Aleutian or cackling.

Possession limit is double the daily bag after opening day.

- **Special “After Season” Youth Hunts**

Feb. 5 & 6, 2005

On these days, only boys and girls 15 years or under who have completed a Hunter Safety Course and possess a Junior Hunting License are eligible to hunt.

An adult hunter, 18 years or older, must accompany juniors in the field.

All state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges in the Grasslands will be open at no charge for juniors.

Private clubs are encouraged to host juniors and help further our hunting traditions.

- **Hunting Seasons in Other Zones**

**Northeastern:** Ducks – Oct. 9–Jan. 9; Geese – Oct. 9–Jan. 16

**Southern San Joaquin Valley:** Ducks – Oct. 23–Nov. 13 and Nov. 20–Jan. 30;

Geese – Oct. 30–Jan. 30

- **Information** (Area Code 209)

Grassland Water District, 826-5188

California Department of Fish and Game, 826-0463

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 826-3508

## Interagency Cooperation to Control Mosquitoes Showing Good Results

With both birds and bug-bites in the balance, wetland managers and mosquito abatement personnel put new emphasis on controlling mosquito populations on the Westside.

Merced County Mosquito Abatement District manager Allan Inman said meetings between Fish and Game and Grassland Water District staff occur each year prior to flood-up of thousands of acres of waterfowl habitat.

But with the appearance of West Nile Virus in northern California this summer, cooperation between the agencies has advanced to a new level.

"We've always had good cooperation from the Grasslands, CA Fish and Game, and the USFWS, but the coordination this year has been exceptional," said Inman.

Hoping to keep potential mosquito breeding sites as far away from population centers as possible for as long as possible, wetland managers have been flooding up remote areas first while keeping the abatement district informed on a weekly basis about which ground has received water.

"That really helps us when we go out to check for mosquito larvae," Inman said.

Knowing which areas have been newly flooded helps abatement district technicians as they sample for larvae, since recently flooded areas are breeding grounds for a different species of mosquito than wetlands that have been inundated for some time. Inman said the larvicides used by the district are species-specific.

Fish and Game biologist Sean Allen

said state personnel have been providing the Mosquito Abatement District with maps each Friday showing new areas that have been flooded for waterfowl.

Sean said flooding of the southern portions of the wildlife area closest to Los Banos was delayed as part of the interagency effort. "We changed the management on some wetlands and that proved to be mutually beneficial," he said.

Grassland Water District manager Don Marciochi said his agency also provides weekly maps of flooded ground and has delayed flood-up near population centers for as long as possible.

Marciochi said the real challenge with delayed flooding is that some migratory birds show up in the Grasslands in early August and adequate habitat is needed as the birds arrive.

Scott Lower, director of operations for the GWD, believes there are a "lot of ducks" in areas that have early water. "South Grassland is ahead of North Grassland in terms of the volume of water and the ducks have responded," he said. "The first large flocks of pintail arrived by Aug. 8 and there was adequate early water for them.

"By Sept. 26 about 70 percent of the ducks clubs will have started to receive water," Lower said. "GWD's more than 50,000 acres of wetlands will be fully flooded by the start of waterfowl season."

Some wetlands within the GWD have been flooded since August. However, wetlands were left dry until late September in areas within three to four miles of Los Banos, Dos Palos and

Gustine.

"The biggest flooding is currently underway," Lower said. "Mosquito district officials have been good to work with and we want to do our part to curb the spread of West Nile virus."

Inman said the agencies' combined efforts have paid off so far this year.

Although there are about two weeks left in what Inman described as "prime transmission season," fewer than expected mosquitoes are buzzing about.

Inman credited the later flood-up, more precise and frequent aerial application of larvicide, and a March start with adulticide applications as reasons for the lower counts.

But as the bug count drops, the bird count seems to be increasing.

With duck season still nearly a month away, CDF&G's Sean Allen said he has already seen a nice number of birds populating the wildlife area. A mixed bag of pintail, green-winged teal, and even a few widgeon have made their way south, and more northern shovelers than normal appear to be frequenting local wetlands, he said. Surveys now being conducted by CDF&G will give us an update of current waterfowl status.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," he said of the coming hunting season.

For information about West Nile, contact the Merced County Mosquito Abatement District toll-free by calling (800) 622-3242. Questions about water deliveries should be directed to Lower at the GWD at (209) 826-5188.

*[Partially excerpted from the Los Banos Enterprise.]*

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