
GRASSLAND TODAY

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A Message from the President:

GWD Takes Action to Protect Grasslands from Los Banos Bypass, Sprawl

By Pepper Snyder

Most Grasslands landowners are aware of the many land use threats the Grasslands has faced during the past two decades. Housing development projects in the Grasslands corridor east of Los Banos; ranchette and industrial development proposals on our western flank near Volta and Gustine; sewer treatment facilities; moto-cross parks, and the list goes on.

Fortunately, and in large part due to the resources and dedication of Grassland landowners, most of these threats have been mitigated or thwarted altogether, some even resulting in the restoration of historic wetland areas such as the Mud Slough and Gadwall wildlife areas.

Unfortunately, we never seem to be able to take a moment to sit back and bask in our successes. Once again, the party seems to end before it has even gotten started. This time it appears our biggest challenges lie before us, not behind, and are taking the shape of a proposed Highway 152 bypass, a cross-valley "bullet train," a county population that will nearly double by 2020, and a variety of other pressure points which will undoubtedly cramp a habitat that requires ample space and prefers few neighbors.

Of all the recent threats that Grassland faces, the Highway 152 "Los Banos" bypass has been the most anticipated and of the greatest concern. As a result, the GWD recently submitted twenty-two pages of legal comments on the project, pointing out the deficiencies in the environmental impact report and challenging the selection of any bypass route at this stage. Why not jump to a conclusion now and pick our preferred route? Frankly, because it's simply too early in the process to be able to fully understand what actual growth inducing impacts a southern or northern bypass would have on the Grasslands.

And, considering the positions of the City of Los Banos and Merced County will have great influence on where the highway is actually built (both agencies recently endorsed the northern bypass alternative), it is critical that the GWD assesses all potential scenarios and be prepared to challenge any selection if it does not come with adequate measures to protect the Grasslands.

Growth will occur with or without a bypass. That is clear based on current growth patterns. What the GWD must be concerned with is how to ensure that existing growth, and growth induced by a bypass, are adequately buffered so as to keep sufficient space between the urban edge and the fringe of the Grasslands. Ironically, it's the bypass debate itself that may lead to a much larger protective effort that transcends one proposed highway and gets to my number one priority: the perpetual protection of the Grasslands. While we have spent hundreds of hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years fighting individual projects, it's now time we pursued a proactive strategy that provides the Grasslands with greater long-term protection while giving clear direction to local governments

on what areas should be avoided so we can reduce conflicts and litigation and protect the Grasslands from harmful land uses.

The GWD recently took action to pursue this concept as a formal partnership with the City of Los Banos and Merced County and we will soon be meeting with officials from both agencies to discuss how best to move forward. We will be sure to keep you updated on this process and welcome your input as the effort evolves.

See map on page 3

As the expression goes, the only constant in this world is that nothing remains constant. Whether it be a bypass, train, housing development or airport, we should all recognize that these are simply the impacts of the moment, and new ones will take their place in the future. That is why it is critical that we move forward now, without hesitation, with a comprehensive effort that does justice in protecting the vast resources of the Grasslands for generations to come. That is precisely what the GWD intends to do and based on the many shared concerns I have heard from you over the years, I know that I can count on your support.

Ducks Unlimited and Grassland Leaders Appointed

Interior Secretary Gale Norton, in consultation with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, appointed Dr. Rudy Rosen, director of operations for the western regional office of Ducks Unlimited, and Don Marciochi, general manager of the Grassland Water District, to the Bay-Delta Public Advisory Committee (BDPAC).

The appointment of Ducks Unlimited and Grassland Water District leaders coincides with DU's recent actions to develop a wetland water policy program aimed at increasing wetland water reliability in California and the West.

"DU appreciates that Secretary

Norton and Governor Schwarzenegger recognize the importance of having wetland interests represented in this important forum," said Rosen. "We need to ensure that wetlands are not overlooked in the Bay-Delta debate."

Established in 2001, the committee advises federal agencies on all aspects of CALFED Bay-Delta program implementation. The members of BDPAC represent an array of environmental, water, tribal and civic organizations and provide a key link among the 25 state and federal CALFED agencies, stakeholders and the public.

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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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2004-2005 Waterfowl Harvest "Best in Years"

Duck hunters on private clubs and public areas enjoyed generally excellent shooting during the 2004–2005 season according to officials at the Grassland Water District. The annual survey of birds harvested in the Grassland Ecological Area showed impressive increases.

Rich Wright, biologist for the GWD, said 49 private clubs took part in the voluntary survey. Clubs north of Highway 152 averaged 4.31 birds per hunter while clubs to the south averaged 3.69.

All 14 public areas showed an increase in waterfowl harvest as well, causing Bill Cook, manager of the Los Banos Wildlife Area, to exclaim, "This was the best hunting season since 1976."

Last season hunters enjoyed a 93-day season with a seven-duck daily bag. Species such as pintail, mallard, canvasback, redhead and scaup had restricted bags and, in the cases of canvasback and pintail, shortened seasons.

Wright noted that private duck shooters in the north shot close to a one-bird increase over 2003–2004, while clubs in the south went up "just over" a quarter-bird per gun.

Over the last four seasons, north Grasslands clubs averaged 3.61, 3.25, 3.41 and 4.31, respectively. Clubs to the south averaged 2.69, 2.59, 3.41 and 3.69.

"Historically clubs in the north took earlier water than clubs in the south," said director Bob Nardi of the GWD. "As a consequence, northern clubs had better shooting, especially during the first week of the season. Now that clubs to the south are flooding early, the harvest gap between the two areas in the Grasslands has closed considerably."

Throughout the Grasslands green-winged teal was the top bird in the bag followed by shoveler and widgeon. However, the survey pointed out some interesting distribution patterns.

For example, private duck clubs in the north harvested 52.8 percent green-wings, up 7.3 percent from the previous year. Clubs in the south harvested 52.2 percent green-winged teal, the same percentage as the year before.

Northern hunters took 14.3 percent shovelers, down 4.5 percent, while their southern counterparts took 13.6 percent shovelers, up 1.3 percent. Another curiosity was the take of cinnamon teal, off 0.6 percent in the north but up 2.6 percent in the south. Cinnamon made up 5.7 percent of the bag in the north and just 4.8 percent in the south.

The widgeon harvest made up 8.7 percent of the northern hunters' bag and 12.8 percent of southern hunters' bag. The take of widgeon was up throughout the Grasslands—3.0 percent in the south, 2.5 percent in the north.

Mallard, pintail and gadwall turned up with less frequency in the bag this season compared with 2003–2004. Pintail were down 1.5 percent in the north, 1.2 percent in the south; mallard down 2.8 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively and gadwall down 0.8 percent and 1.8 percent, respectively.

Among the public areas the Gadwall Unit topped them all with a 2.98 birds per gun average, up a whopping 1.72 from the previous year.

Other public areas with high averages included North Freitas, 2.89; Merced, 2.72; San Luis, 2.52; West Bear Creek, 2.47; South Freitas, 2.43; and Mendota, 2.22.

For information about the harvest survey contact Wright at the GWD office in Los Banos at (209) 826-5188.

Waterbird Conservation Planners Seek Partners

The Point Reyes Bird Observatory is initiating development of a regional California Waterbird Conservation Plan with partners in the Central Valley and has scheduled a 10 a.m. meeting, July 28 at The Nature Conservancy's Cosumnes River Preserve.

Dave Shuford, senior biologist for the PRBO's wetland ecology division, said, "We will send out additional information about the meeting, including an agenda, a tentative outline of the conservation plan and a request for data about waterbirds in the region."

For information about the meeting, contact Shuford at (415) 868-1221, ext. 14 or online at dshuford@prbo.org.

Klamath Basin Called “Critical” for Pintail that Depart Grasslands

By Mike Miller and Joe Fleskes,
USGS, Dixon Field Station

Any duck hunter worth his salt can tell you that there are jillions of pintails in the Klamath Basin during the fall and early winter. But fewer are aware of that region’s importance to pintails during the spring migration. In fact, a recent study designed to use satellite telemetry to identify spring migration routes, staging areas, and destinations of pintails after they depart the Grasslands and other Central Valley areas has shown just how critical the Klamath Basin and surrounding region are to this special species. This research was supported by funding provided by the Tuscany Research Institute of Las Vegas via grants to Ducks Unlimited and California Waterfowl Association.

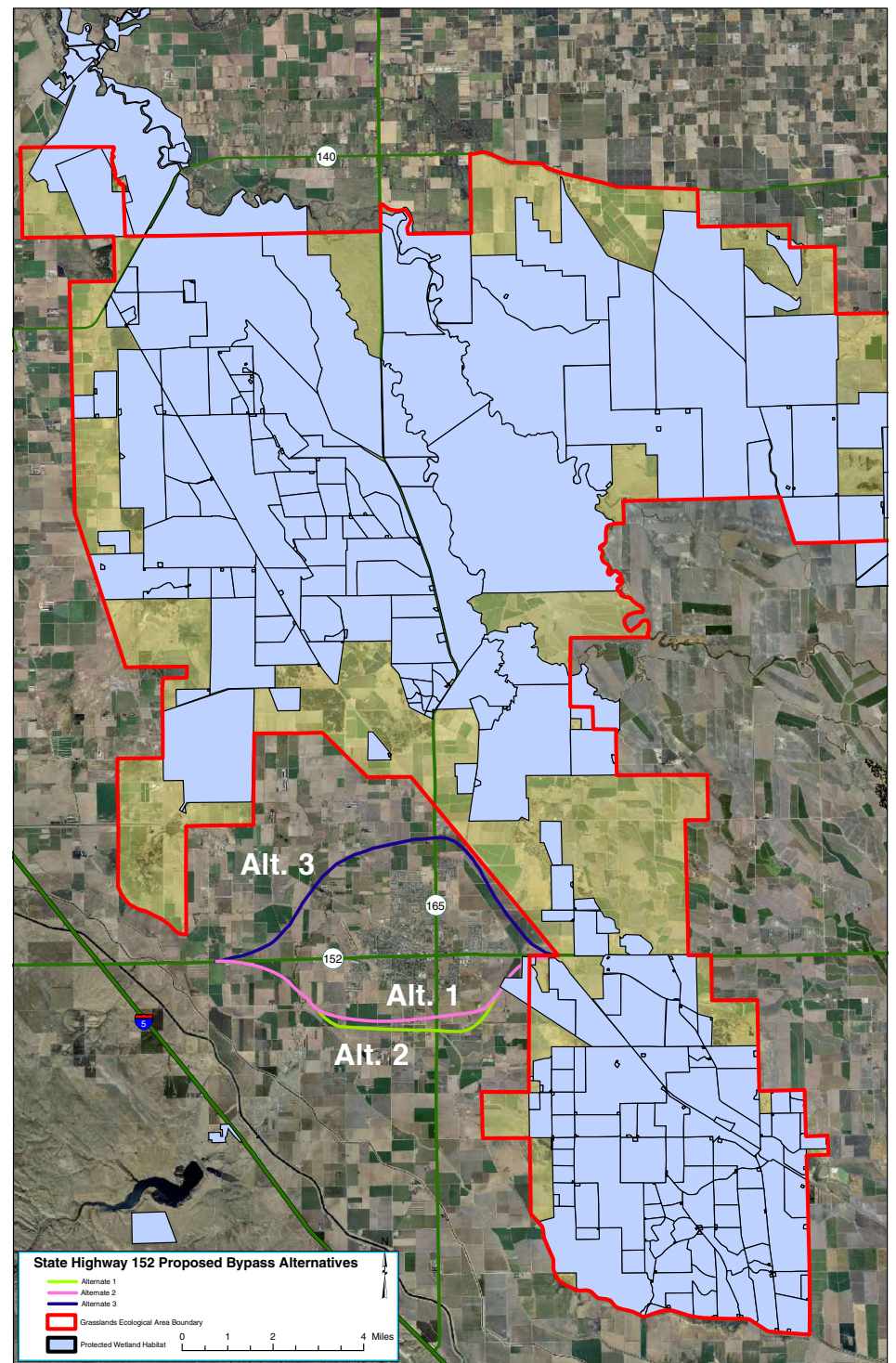
By deploying back-mounted satellite-received transmitters on adult female pintails in late winter, a USGS research team from the Dixon and San Francisco Bay Estuary Field Stations of the Western Ecological Research Center found that 77 to 87 percent of all pintails that migrated north from the Central Valley stopped first during spring in southern Oregon, northeastern California, or extreme northwestern Nevada (convenient acronym is “SONEC”). Habitats used by pintails during spring in the SONEC region were located in the Klamath, Malheur and Harney Basins, Warner Valley, Upper Klamath Lake, Klamath Forest, and Chewaucan and Sycan Marshes in Oregon; Butte Valley, Lower Klamath, Tule Lake, Honey Lake, Modoc Plateau, Surprise Valley, Big Valley, and Fall River Valley in California; and the Massacre Lake area of Nevada.

Pintails remained in SONEC for variable lengths of time, gathering nutrients crucial for migration and reproduction, before moving on. About 25 percent of the pintails stayed in SONEC an average of two months before flying directly to Alaska over the ocean or along the coast, usually around the last week of April or so; another 25 percent stayed about a month and then flew directly to Canada, usually southern Alberta; about 40 percent stayed a few days to a few weeks before flying to southern Idaho and/or western Montana and then on to southern Alberta; the last remaining 10 percent or so headed east-

erly through Nevada and Utah and ended up in the Dakotas or remained in SONEC.

Tracking revealed that about 40 percent of pintail locations in the SONEC region overall were on privately-owned lands with 86 percent on private lands in the Warner Valley and Summer Lake subregions. Pintail habitat use was similar during day and night and for all pintail age/sex classes.

Critical SONEC habitats and food resources for spring-staging pintails and the future of pintails in the Pacific Flyway cannot be overstated. Thus, conservation of waterfowl habitats in the SONEC region is crucial not only for pintails, but also for the numerous other waterfowl species that migrate through there from their wintering grounds in the Grasslands in Merced County and other parts of the Central Valley.



California Breeding Population of Ducks Increases

The breeding population of ducks increased during 2005, according to the Department of Fish and Game's annual breeding pair survey.

The breeding population of mallards increased from 262,424 in 2004 to 317,869 this year, a 21 percent increase, and the number of total ducks increased from 412,799 to 615,241 (49 percent). Mallards, however, are still below the long-term average. "We expect better production and a larger fall flight this year because of the late, abundant spring rains," said Fish and Game biologist Dan Yparraguirre.

DFG biologists and warden pilots have conducted this survey using fixed-wing aircraft since 1955. The California Waterfowl Association, under contract with DFG, has assisted with the survey for the past 12 years. The population estimates are for the surveyed areas

only, and surveyed areas include wetland and agricultural areas in northeastern California, throughout the Central Valley, the Suisun Marsh, and some coastal valleys.

Yparraguirre said his agency is waiting for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service breeding population estimates from the primary breeding areas of waterfowl—Alaska, the north-central portion of the United States and Canada—indicating the majority of California's wintering duck population originates from these federally surveyed areas.

"Once Fish and Game receives the estimates and the federal frameworks for waterfowl hunting regulations, it will then make a recommendation to the Fish and Game Commission regarding this year's waterfowl hunting regulations," he said.

DU, GWD Leaders Appointed to CALFED Group . . .

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"We are pleased to see these new members joining the committee," said Jason Peltier, deputy assistant secretary of the Interior for water and science. "This is an exciting and challenging time for the CALFED program and the constructive engagement of the committee members will contribute in large measure to assuring that we move forward on a common-sense path of implementation."

"These new members join us at a critical time as we work to ensure that the Delta remains both a reliable source for much of the state's water supply and an ecological treasure," said committee chair Gary Hunt. "Coming in the wake of congressional reauthorization last fall, these appointments further demonstrate a commitment by the federal government to work collaboratively and openly with us to resolve some of this state's long-standing water issues."

The Grassland Water District is the water purveyor to the largest block of freshwater wetlands remaining in California. The Grasslands Ecological Area, as it is known, comprises roughly 180,000 acres of state, federal and privately owned wetlands within California's Central Valley. The Grasslands was recently recognized as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

"The Grassland wetlands have much

to gain—or lose—by actions taken in the Delta, as most of the water wetlands receive in the San Joaquin Valley originates in northern California," said Marciochi. "Our regional focus, combined with Ducks Unlimited's international expertise in wetland conservation, will allow us to effectively participate in the CALFED decision-making process and ensure that wetlands south of the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta are fully considered prior to actions being implemented."

In addition to the 30-member federal advisory committee that meets every two months, there are nine subcommittees that meet monthly and focus on specific aspects of the broad CALFED program. The California Bay-Delta Authority, the state agency charged with oversight of the CALFED program, includes a representative of the advisory committee in addition to appointed public members and high-level officials from both state and federal agencies and the state legislature.

Marciochi said the United States alone has lost more than half of its original wetlands—nature's most productive ecosystem—and continues to lose more than 100,000 wetland acres each year.

For more information about the Bay Delta Public Advisory Committee and the Bay Delta Authority, go to <http://calwater.ca.gov>.

Grassland Notes

• **Grassland Water District Notice of Election** — The Grassland Water District General Election is scheduled to be held on **Tuesday, November 8, 2005** should more than two candidates file to run for the two director-at-large positions that are up for election this year. The director candidates must be either (a) a holder of title to land within the Grassland Water District or (b) the legal representative of a holder of title to land within the Grassland Water District. **Declaration of Candidacy** forms can be picked up at the Grassland Water District office, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635 or at the Merced County Clerk's office, 2222 M Street, Merced, CA 95340, commencing on **July 18, 2005** and must be filed with the Merced County Clerk, either in person or by certified mail received by the County, not later than **5:00 p.m., Friday, August 12, 2005**. For more information, contact Veronica Woodruff at the Grassland Water District office, (209) 826-5188.

* * *

• **Most Prominent** — Each year over the past decade the top birds harvested on private duck clubs in the Grasslands have been green-winged teal and shoveler, ranked one and two, respectively. However, the third most common bird in the hunter's bag has fluctuated among four species—northern pintail (four years), widgeon (three years), mallard (two years) and gadwall (one year).

* * *

• **Send Addresses** — New landowners or those who have changed addresses are asked to provide updated information to the Grassland Water District for inclusion in its mailings. Information: (209) 826-5188.

* * *

• **Huge Asset** — A recent study sponsored jointly by the Grassland Water District, Great Valley Center and the Packard Foundation found that direct expenditures related to hunting and other recreational uses in the Grassland Ecological Area contribute almost \$50 million annually to the local economy and account for 800 jobs. Information: (209) 826-5188.



Los Banos Wildlife Area Celebrates 75 Years

Waterfowl enthusiasts may not realize it, but the Los Banos Wildlife Refuge on Henry Miller Avenue was California's first such designated area, established in 1930.

This summer the wildlife area celebrated its 75th anniversary with keynote speakers, tours, a luncheon "under tent" sponsored by Ducks Unlimited and California Waterfowl Association, and a look to the future with the dedication of a new nature trail. The mile-long trail is significant because it will soon be traveled by thousands of school children each year as part of the Grassland Environmental Education Center experience. The center will be relocated to the Los

Banos WA site in the future.

The wildlife area, which includes a reception center and office and staff to assist with interpretive walks and public-use activities, has developed into a first-class facility over the years. Originally established as a 3,000-acre wildlife area it has expanded into a 17,800-acre complex with eight sites of diversified habitat.

Roger Wilbur, who began working with Fish and Game in 1952 and continues to serve as assistant manager of Los Banos WA, said the operation has shifted toward broader, science-based adaptive management. He said the biological staff performs necessary work to

*Upper left — Fish and Game director **Ryan Broddrick** speaks at ceremony. Middle — **Eileen Edmunds** releases a banded songbird. Right — **Roger Wilbur** cuts the ribbon for the new Nature Trail. Lower left — **Lara Sparks** identifies a songbird captured in a mist net. Lower right — **Wilbur** holds an award for his 53 years of service to Los Banos Wildlife Area. (Photos courtesy of DFG.)*

assess the habitats and species present on the wildlife area complex.

Fish and Game believes there are more than 250 species or subspecies of birds, including at least 10 species that are considered sensitive; 33 species of mammals, 19 reptiles and amphibians, including one threatened and at least three species of special concern. In addition the wildlife area boasts more than 330 species of plants.

Return Service Requested

May/June 2005



Grassland Landowners Meeting at Capacity

Landowners and wetlands managers filled the Los Banos Sportsman's Club on May 21 for the annual Grassland Landowners Meeting. During the three-hour session they learned about the 2004–2005 Harvest Survey, the continuing challenges of controlling mosquitoes and West Nile Virus and the ongoing threats to the 180,000-acre Grassland wetland complex.

Don Marciochi, general manager of the Grassland Water District, spoke about the district's "difficult task" of securing 55,000 acre-feet of Level 4 water—guaranteed by federal legislation—that is necessary for spring and summer irrigation and the estimated 50,000 waterfowl that remain here during the breeding season. "We're using flood up water now in the hope sources of water will be found to meet the needs of wetlands in the fall," he said.



Eyes forward — A packed house (above) greeted speakers at the annual Grassland Landowners Meeting in May. Left, **Kim Forrest**, project leader, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, presents the coveted Ramsar Convention Certificate to **Pepper Snyder**, president of the Grassland Water District. (Photos by Veronica Woodruff.)

Spokesmen from California Waterfowl Association, Ducks Unlimited and both the Grasslands Water and Resource Conservation Districts covered a variety of subjects of particular importance to private landowners. These included projects that improve water delivery, draining and efficiency that will help comply with so-called "Best Management Practices" and water standards for the San Joaquin River.

Charles Van Gastel, who retired after 12 years as a director of the Grassland Water District and continues to voluntarily process data for the annual Harvest Survey, was presented the cov-

eted J. Martin Winton Conservation Award.

Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, presented the Ramsar Convention certificate to Pepper Snyder, president of the GWD, emblematic of the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area's recognition as a Wetland of International Importance. The Grasslands is one of 22 wetland sites in the United States to receive this distinction.

Copies of reports handed out at the meeting are available from the Grassland Water District by calling (209) 826-5188.