

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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Water Management Plan Nears Completion

Water District Upgrades Delivery and Drainage Systems

Going into the 2005 fall water deliveries, a Grassland Water District official believes the outlook for critical wetlands habitat needed to support the migration of millions of ducks, geese, shorebirds, wading birds and neotropicals is sufficient to carry state, federal and private landowners through the season.

Scott Lower, assistant general manager of operations, said the district has received its full allocation of Level II and Level IV water guaranteed by the Central Valley Project Improvement Act, totaling about 180,000 acre-feet. "Approximately 10-percent of the district took advantage of August water to provide needed habitat for arriving pintail ducks," Lower said. "The amount of early water was split pretty evenly this year, with the North and the South Grasslands covering about the same amount of ground."

The GWD delivered approximately 50,000 acre-feet of water in September and will provide an additional 35,000 acre-feet through Oct. 22, opening day of waterfowl hunting season.

Lower said the GWD took on numerous major projects this summer to improve the delivery and drainage for the area in meeting with the goals of Best Management Practices for the use of CVPIA water. Top priority was the improvement of the Mud Slough Bypass and Camp 13 Drainage areas.

"Camp 13 is the primary drainage for most of the South Grasslands," he said, "and our efficiency to move water there is vastly improved."

Last year's flooding exposed major capacity problems in the system on the North Grasslands. Now that has been dealt with, as approximately three miles of the channel were excavated to improve flow and eight new 34-inch pipes were installed under Santa Fe Grade to improve water capacity.



Summer Work — Landmovers remove silt and earth to improve flows on the Mud Slough Bypass Project, improving efficiency for water delivery and drainage. Recipients of the new project include cinnamon teal and a variety of shorebirds such as the marbled godwit.

Also in the north, the SF-9 weir was replaced with a new concrete structure as part of the North American Wetland Conservation Act that was supervised by California Waterfowl Association/GWD biologist Richard Wright.

Ducks Unlimited biologist Chris Hildebrandt supervised installation of three new siphon pipes at the Kesterson Ditch and a box culvert for the Mud Slough Drain at Coast Cattle Duck Club. These two accomplishments represent the final phases of the 2004 Mud Slough NAWCA project.

District crews also excavated other channels this summer including the Rubino and Westside ditches; the Mesquite, Cotton and Hollow Tree drains; and a portion of the Agatha Canal Extension.

They also made headway on unwanted, exotic vegetation such as water hyacinth.

"Aquatic vegetation that plagued us through the 2004 fall delivery was kept

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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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Service Approves Plan to Acquire 46,400 Acres

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its decision to expand the borders of the Grassland Wildlife Management Area by 46,400 acres. The expanded area effectively enlarges the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area—the largest, contiguous wetland complex that still remains in the Central Valley—by 25 percent.

The habitat expansion is planned for east of the existing Merced National Wildlife Refuge on privately held land that extends nearly to Highway 99.

“The decision comes after a lengthy six-year planning process for the wildlife management area expansion,” said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. “The service can now begin to protect habitat within the designated expansion area by negotiating with and purchasing conservation easements from landowners who are willing sellers.”

Before deciding to expand the wildlife management area the USFWS conducted an extensive environmental assessment and public review that are documented in the Finding of No Significant Impact. Final approval from state and county governments is needed before acquisition can begin.

Habitat within the 46,400 acres is important to migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, sandhill cranes and threatened and endangered species including four types of freshwater crustacea, San Joaquin kit fox and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard.

“Our top priority out there is to protect native plants habitats, including grasslands with vernal pools and riparian corridors,” Forrest said. “We also will be supporting agriculture that is friendly to wildlife, that which includes crops such as small grains, wheat, harvested corn, alfalfa and pasture.”

She described the area as “rolling hills”—landscape that wouldn’t be converted to ponds. “The landscape doesn’t call for additional water,” Forrest said. “That’s not what naturally occurred there. There are not a lot of wetlands. It’s more of a foraging area for geese and sandhill cranes.”

Forrest said her agency intends to purchase easements according to the availability of funds. “The expansion provides landowners an opportunity to sell a conservation easement on all or part of their property to the Fish and

Wildlife Service on a willing seller basis at fair market value,” she said. “Our goal is to preserve California’s important wildlife habitat, open space and agricultural and rural lifestyle. In exchange for payment landowners agree to maintain wetlands and other habitats on their property in perpetuity.”

Wildlife management area lands remain in private ownership and are not opened for public access. Landowners who do not wish to sell an easement are under no obligation to do so and are not required to participate in the federal easement program.

“We view this as an addition to an already successful conservation easement program that started 30 years ago to protect the North and South Grasslands,” Forrest said. “Easements are politically popular and a fairly economical way of protecting habitats.”

Over those 30 years the USFWS has acquired about 80 percent of the land in the North and South Grasslands through conservation easements. The agency is funded by only \$1.5 million a year to buy more easements that cost between 40- and 60-percent of the appraised value of the property. It will take another \$16 million to complete its acquisitions of requested easements in the North and South Grasslands.

Forrest recognizes the government doesn’t move quickly and funds for the acquisitions will take time, and not become available all at once. “We’ve had lots of public meetings about the expansion east of Merced National Wildlife Refuge, and we’ve got the decision to proceed,” she said. “I’m concerned about false expectations among the landowners out there. It takes a long time to get the money and I’m afraid landowners will get frustrated because the process moves slowly.”

At the same time Forrest is relieved to know approval has been given to act to protect the important landscape. “The valley’s population is growing quickly, encroachment on wildlife and their habitat is intense and land values are going up,” she said. “We want to act before it’s too late.”

For information about the expansion to the Grasslands contact Forrest at (209) 826-3508. To learn about easement acquisitions contact Stephen Dyer, realty officer for the USFWS at (916) 414-6445.

Volta Wildlife Area Expansion includes Sanctuary

Approximately 1,000 acres have been added to the Volta Wildlife Area and a portion of the new acreage—about 250 acres—will be left as a sanctuary for five years. The effects of the sanctuary will be evaluated after that period of time.

Bill Cook, leader of the Los Banos Wildlife Area Complex, said the idea of creating a sanctuary on the western-most edge of the Grasslands came as a recommendation from a coalition of public agencies and private landowners.

“The recommendation came from the Grassland Habitat Management Coordination Committee,” Cook said. “The idea is to replicate the Gadwall Unit in the South Grasslands, a place where we’ve had great success attracting birds and improving hunting.”

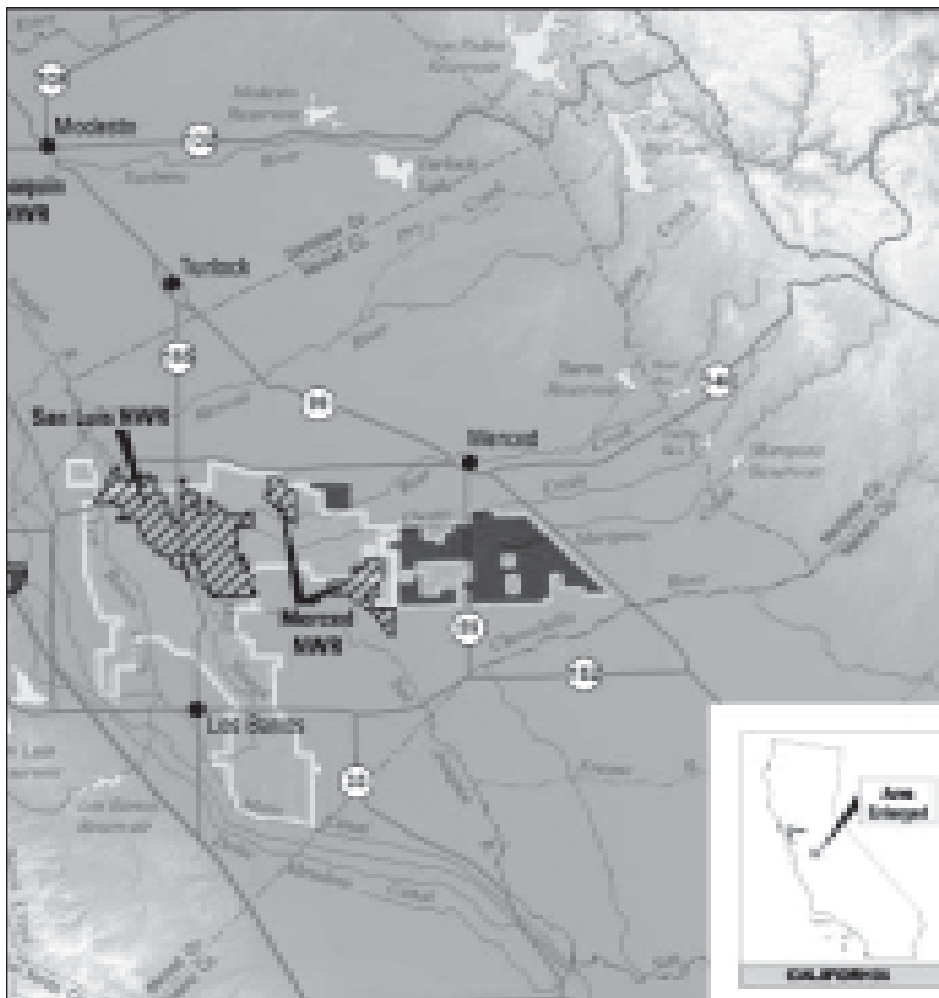
The sanctuary at the Gadwall Unit is the only such area in the South Grasslands and proved beneficial to hunters

at the state-operated area and surrounding clubs. Cook said there are no sanctuaries on public lands on the western edge of the Grasslands. The other half of the Volta WA expansion will be hunted. Information: (209) 826-0463.

Water District Board to be Decided by Election

Two seats on the Grassland Water District Board of Directors are up for grabs in the Nov. 8 election. Ballots will be mailed to district landowners in October, according to Veronica Woodruff, assistant general manager of the GWD.

Those vying for the two positions on the five-member board include incumbents Pepper Snyder (Clear Lake) and Jeff Kerry (Deer Park), and challengers Joe Collura (Mesquite), Byron Hisey (Hollister) and Bill Parham (Coast Cattle Club).



Large addition — The dark block on the map east of Merced National Wildlife Refuge shows the boundary of the 46,400-acre expansion. The light-colored line is the current boundary of the Grassland Ecological Area. Map provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Grassland Notes

• **Mosquito treatment** — The Merced County Mosquito Abatement District is offering to apply a mosquito barrier spray directly to the outside of private duck clubs’ living areas. While the barrier spray will not eliminate all mosquitoes or the possibility of contacting the West Nile Virus, clubs can expect a 70 percent reduction in adult mosquito populations for 21 to 28 days. To request the free treatment contact the Mosquito Abatement District between 6:30 a.m. – 3 p.m. by calling toll-free, (800) 622-3242. Treatments will be scheduled the week prior to the Oct. 22 opening of waterfowl hunting season.

* * *

• **Water delivery** — Wetlands managers with changes to water delivery schedules or questions about water should direct their queries to the Grassland Water District. Communication with district canal tenders is the best way to ensure a smooth fall flood up. Clubs in the North Grasslands should contact Tim Poole at (209) 704-5184 or Rob Kocher at (209) 704-5191. In the South Grasslands call Rick Rasmussen at (209) 704-5186.

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• **Biologist honored** — California Waterfowl Association biologist Chadd Santerre has been recognized by the North American Wetland Conservation Act Committee for his 2004 accomplishments including coordinating the design and construction of 24 enhancement projects covering 5,162 acres and five restoration projects covering 1,519 acres. Santerre used \$1.7 million in NAWCA funds to carry out the projects, including many in the Grasslands.

* * *

• **Wine Bucks for the Ducks** — CWA and Bear Flag Marketing are teaming up for a pre-season special on CWA’s Cabernet Sauvignon. Purchase 3 cases: receive 6 Hunting Heritage (HH) logo wine glasses, FREE. Purchase 5 cases: receive a limited edition, autographed poster of the 2005 HH Stamp, plus 6 HH logo wine glasses, FREE. Purchase 10 cases: receive a framed, matted, limited edition, autographed poster of the 2005 HH Stamp, plus 12 HH logo wine glasses, FREE. For info, (415) 899-8466.

Waterfowl Hunting Regulations 2005–2006

Balance of State Zone including Grasslands

Information: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — (209) 826-3508
California Department of Fish and Game — (209) 826-0463
Regulations Web Site — <http://www.dfg.ca.gov>

Season: October 22, 2005 through January 29, 2006
100 Straight Days for Ducks and Geese

Exception: December 1, 2005 through January 29, 2006
60 Straight Days for Canvasback Ducks

Daily Limits: Seven Ducks
Four Geese

Exceptions: Bag limit of seven ducks may contain not more than five mallards, of which one may be a hen mallard, three scaup, two redheads, one pintail and one canvasback

Bag limit of four geese may contain not more than three white-fronted geese and three large species of Canada geese

Possession Limit: Double the daily bag

Mechanical Decoys: Dec. 1, 2005 through January 29, 2006

Youth Hunts: Special “after season” hunts for boys and girls 15 years and under who hold a Junior Hunting License are February 4 & 5, 2006

Shooting Hours: One half-hour before sunrise to sunset

Additional Seasons: Northeastern Zone — October 8, 2005 through January 20, 2006
Ducks — Oct. 8–Jan. 20; Geese — Oct. 8–Jan. 15

Southern San Joaquin Zone — October 22, 2005
through January 29, 2006

2005–2006 Waterfowl Shooting Times for Los Banos, California

One Half-Hour before Sunrise to Sunset

*Provided by the Astronomical Applications Department, U.S. Naval Observatory**

Date	Morning Start	Evening Stop
Oct. 22	6:48	6:17
23	6:49	6:16
26	6:52	6:12
29	6:55	6:09
30**	5:56	5:08
Nov. 2	5:59	5:05
5	6:02	5:02
6	6:03	5:01
9	6:06	4:58
12	6:09	4:56
13	6:10	4:55
16	6:13	4:53
19	6:17	4:57
20	6:18	4:50
23	6:21	4:49
26	6:24	4:48
27	6:25	4:47
30	6:25	4:47
Dec. 3***	6:30	4:46
4	6:31	4:46
7	6:34	4:46
10	6:36	4:47
11	6:37	4:47
14	6:39	4:47
17	6:41	4:48
18	6:42	4:49
21	6:43	4:50
24	6:45	4:52
28	6:46	4:54
31	6:47	4:57
Jan. 4	6:47	5:00
7	6:47	5:03
8	6:47	5:03
11	6:47	5:06
14	6:46	5:09
15	6:46	5:10
18	6:45	5:13
21	6:43	5:17
22	6:43	5:18
25	6:41	5:21
28	6:39	5:24
29	6:38	5:25
Special "After Season" Youth Shoot when only Boys and Girls 15 years and under may carry or fire a shotgun		
Feb. 4	6:33	5:32
5	6:32	5:33

* U.S. Naval Observatory web site: <http://aa.usno.navy.mil>

** Daylight Savings Time changes to Pacific Standard Time

*** Mechanical spinning wing decoys may be used

Return Service Requested

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District Upgrades Delivery and Drainage. . . (continued from page 1)

in check this year,” Lower said. “More than 360 gallons of aquatic herbicide were applied to our canal systems the past summer.”

The first herbicide applications began as early as March when the first signs of aquatic growth began. The largest application took place from mid-July through August. District staff did most of the spraying though some helicopter applications were used in areas that were too difficult to access.

“We will evaluate the successes and failures of the spray program,” Lower said. “We will be looking at what type of spray equipment is the most efficient, cost effective and requires the least amount of manpower to control the ongoing vegetation problem. The bottom line is to gain a better understanding of how best to attack it.”

Another milestone for the GWD is the near-completion of its Water Management Plan that must be filed with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation by Oct. 31. This plan will guide staff and directors for future planning, water delivery

and accountability for the duration of the district’s water contract with the federal agency.

Further, in conjunction with the California Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the district has identified potential Best Management Practices as required by federal legislation HR 2828 to improve salt load management discharges into the San Joaquin River.

The GWD is also conducting a salt load program in conjunction with Fish and Game to evaluate salt load discharge. “The final outcome could result in earlier or later releases of spring water into the river,” Lower said. “Purpose of this pilot study is to see if changes in spring discharge can reduce downstream salt loads in the San Joaquin.”

Lower is making one “last minute” appeal to wetland managers as fall floodup intensifies.

“We encourage clubs to have their ditches clean and control structures in good condition so that water will flow

as quickly and efficiently as possible,” he said. “Stay in close contact with your GWD canal tender and keep him informed about your water use, as well as both start and stop dates. This will greatly assist the district and insure we keep water losses to a minimum.”

For additional information about GWD operations, projects and water deliveries contact Lower at (209) 826-5188.



Water flows — Improved conveyances help the Grassland Water District deliver and drain its wetlands.