

# GRASSLAND TODAY

## The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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July/August 2006

**Water District Receives \$400,000 Grant**

## **Funds Allow Grasslands to Undertake Major Watershed Planning Effort**

By Osha Meserve –

Adams, Broadwell, Joseph & Cardozo

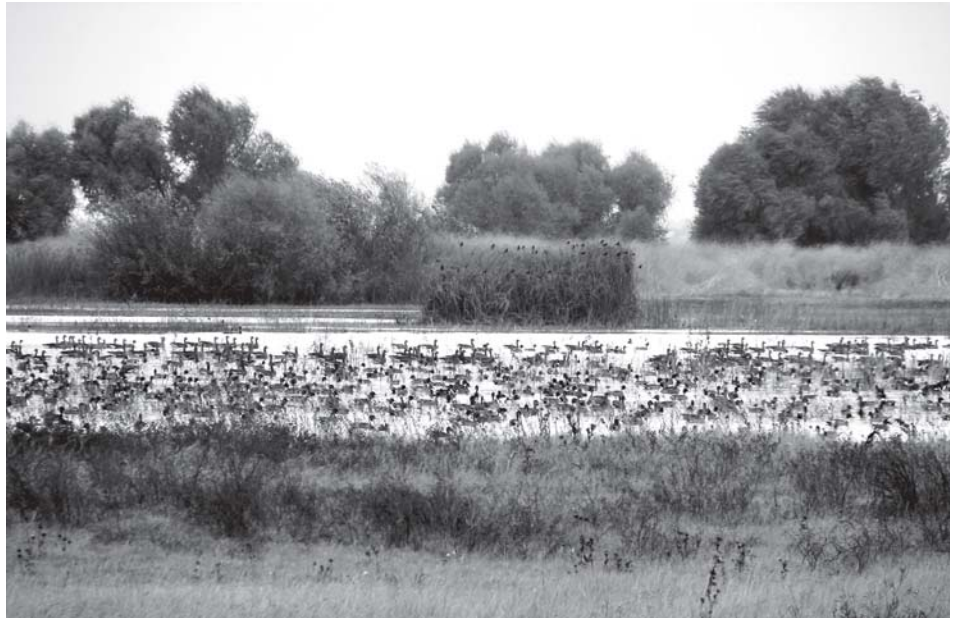
### **What's a Watershed?**

The casual observer might not think of the Grasslands as a watershed because a watershed typically drains into a single lake or river. The relatively flat Grasslands, on the other hand, drain to a complex web of natural and man-made waterbodies, including rivers, creeks, canals and sloughs. All of these waterbodies are actually within the Delta-Mendota and San Joaquin Valley Floor sub-watersheds of the larger San Joaquin Watershed.

Land uses around waterbodies in the Grasslands have profound effects on both water quality and quantity. Local land uses include public and private wetlands, agriculture, residential and industrial uses. Water quality in the Grasslands, the San Joaquin River, and the San Joaquin River's destination—the Bay-Delta—is an ongoing concern. Constituents of concern include mercury, boron, chloride, sodium, selenium and many pesticides.

Some efforts are underway to improve water quality in the Grasslands. Strategies to limit the movement of chemical constituents through the watershed and improve water quality include erosion and sediment control, nutrient management, pesticide management, and water and irrigation water management. The Real Time Water Quality Management project, funded by CALFED, is now in its second phase. That project focuses on how changing the timing of releases of water from refuges and duck clubs can improve downstream water quality. Additionally, the Regional Water Quality Control Board's Irrigated Lands Program includes extensive water quality monitoring and special management measures to improve the quality of discharges from agricultural and other lands.

### **Embarking on a Watershed Planning Journey**



*Preserving Wetland Values – The watershed planning process will enhance and restore the Grasslands, improve water quality and develop stewardship goals for the 180,000-acre complex.*

Recognizing the watershed challenges facing the Grasslands, and the resources available to work through those challenges, the Grassland Water District (GWD) applied for a watershed planning grant from the Department of Water Resources (DWR) Proposition 50, CALFED Watershed Grant Program. The DWR Watershed Program works directly with watershed communities to restore ecological health and improve water management.

In December 2005, GWD submitted a conceptual proposal for a watershed planning process that would eventually lead to development of a Grasslands Stewardship Plan. In early February, DWR invited 61 of the 129 applicants to submit full grant proposals, including GWD. At that point GWD, its partners and consultants had six weeks to transform the conceptual plan into a full-blown watershed planning proposal, including a detailed budget.

### **Good News from Sacramento**

On June 1, 2006 GWD manager Don Marciochi received the good news. Out

of the 61 applicants participating in the second phase of the grant application process, the Grasslands Stewardship Plan was one of the 28 projects selected for funding. GWD now has nearly \$400,000 to embark on a community-based watershed planning process in the Grasslands over the next three years. Upon hearing the news, Marciochi said he was "excited that GWD could begin the important work of planning for the future of the Grasslands" and that "the grant writers had obviously done an excellent job in putting the application together."

DWR Watershed Program Grant Liaison, Amanda Peisch, also expressed enthusiasm for GWD's grant project. "The Grasslands and other Central Valley wetlands play a critical role in the San Joaquin River system, and in turn, the Bay-Delta. That is why DWR is excited to be an integral part of the Grasslands Stewardship process."

The watershed planning effort is modeled on the process outlined in EPA's *Handbook for Developing Water-*

*(Continued, page 6)*

## 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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## Districts Work Together to Reduce West Nile Virus

Receding floodwaters along the Merced and San Joaquin rivers have provided ideal mosquito breeding habitat and some mosquitoes near Hilmar, near George Hatfield Recreation Area, have tested positive for the West Nile virus. Within the Grassland area, mosquitoes on the Hollister L&C and China Island have tested positive.

Allen Inman, manager-entomologist for the county Abatement District, is already aerial spraying mosquitoes in some areas and is concerned the public is becoming complacent about the virus. Not many people have been calling the West Nile hotline at (800) 622-3242.

Inman urges residents and members of private duck clubs to report findings of dead birds, a sure sign West Nile virus is present. The dead birds don't need to be picked up, but a phone call is necessary so Inman can find possible clusters of mosquitoes carrying West Nile.

Due to the presence of West Nile, the Abatement District is again offering a special, free service to duck clubs this fall. On a request basis only, the district will apply residual synthetic pyrethroids (lambda-cyhalothrin or bifenthrin) as a mosquito barrier spray applied directly to the outside of duck club living quarters, buildings, lawns and plants.

These insecticides will not be applied to wetlands, Inman said.

In 2005 some 47 clubs in the Grassland Resource Conservation District took advantage of the service, said manager Don Marciochi. "The Abatement District is working hand-in-hand with us to prevent the spreading of mosquitoes and West Nile," he said. "Their cooperation is remarkable."

While the barrier sprays will not eliminate all mosquitoes, duck clubs can expect a 70 percent reduction in adult mosquito populations for 21 to 28 days. To request treatment call the Abatement District office between 6:30 a.m.-3 p.m., Monday-Friday, at (800) 622-3242 or (209) 722-1527.

Inman said the Abatement District will schedule treatments the week prior to opening day of waterfowl hunting season. As a precaution, Inman urges all hunters to wear repellent this year.

Marciochi said the two districts are working closely as fall flood up begins. The GRCD is providing the schedule and maps of areas to be flooded.

In a three-mile radius of major communities—Gustine, Los Banos and Dos Palos—landowners are asked to flood up as rapidly as possible. "In those areas the faster we flood the easier and more efficient it becomes to spray the properties," Marciochi said.

## Waterfowl Habitat Program Seeking New Enrollments

The California Waterfowl Habitat Program has been assisting private landowners with the management of wetland habitat since 1993. Recognizing the need to help landowners manage habitat for waterfowl on private lands, CWA and the Department of Fish and Game started the Program with an original enrollment of 6,500 acres in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. Since that time, the Program has steadily grown to include over 27,000 acres of habitat in the Tulare Basin, Grasslands, Suisun Marsh, and Sacramento Valley.

Also known as the Presley Program, the CWHP is one of the few incentive based programs that provide private landowners with technical assistance and financial incentives to manage wetland habitat. "Private lands play an important role in providing habitat for the millions of waterfowl that winter and breed in the Central Valley," said

Chad Fien, a wetland biologist with the Department. "Over two-thirds of the wetlands in the Central Valley are under private ownership and many landowners are not trained in the science of wetland habitat management."

The program pays private landowners \$20/acre annually for a 10-year duration to implement habitat practices in accordance with a detailed management plan written by the Department. Management plans require landowners to implement "moist-soil management" practices such as spring and summer irrigation to produce natural waterfowl food plants, weed abatement to control the spread of invasive plants, and the management of uplands and brood water for breeding ducks.

Applications are due to the Department by October 15, 2006 and a competitive ranking system will be used to select properties for enrollment. For information call Fien at (916) 445-3561.

## Provide Hunter Opportunity: Host a Kids' Event

When Lt. Sean Olague, a state Fish and Game warden, talked to the more than 125 participants at the annual Grassland Landowners Meeting, he surveyed the room with the eyes of a Cooper's hawk, looking for some young faces. He didn't like what he saw.

"There aren't many kids at the meeting," said Olague, a six-year warden who is in charge of hunter education for the Central District's 13 counties. "We must recruit and educate youth people—boys and girls—so our hunting traditions will continue."



**Tradition Lives:** Kevin King, 13, admires his first snow goose, shot on Feb. 4, 2006, during the special Youth Waterfowl Hunt, hosted by the Haywire Land & Cattle Company. With Kevin is his best friend, Jared Wilcox, 13, who holds up the head of the goose for the photograph. Field scout Jeff Quinn said both boys, who reside in Denair, shot full seven-duck limits. "A great time was had by all," Quinn said. "Next stop was at the taxidermist."

He encouraged the crowd to do something for youth on private duck clubs, like hosting a kids' event during the season and taking part in the special, after-season Youth Waterfowl Hunts, the weekend following the regular season. He believes it's the obligation of adults to reach out a hand to youngsters.

"It's the sounds and sights of the marsh at sunrise and camaraderie of the hunt that our youth must experience," Olague said. "We must recruit tomorrow's conservation leaders starting today."

For his part Olague arranges for not less than 100 hunter education classes a year and draws upon the talents and passion of 200 volunteer instructors. As a life-long resident of Los Banos, he understands the value of hunting and

conservation ethics, and the contributions these activities have played in his life.

He's a frequent guest at the Salinas Gun Club, hosted by Joe Cayting, one of his former grade school teachers. They're great friends and enjoy a common bond—duck hunting.

California requires all first time hunters, regardless of age, to complete hunter education training before purchasing a hunting license. The next step is to get young license holders involved. Set up an event to work on habitat projects, learn about marsh management and get them into the field for a hunt. That's the least any club can do.

To contact Olague, call (209) 827-0895. He's full of energy and has plenty of ideas for engaging youth and setting up activities that will nurture the outdoor traditions we value so much.

## Water Supply for Flood Up and Maintenance is Good

Private wetlands owners, as well as managers of state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges in the Grasslands Ecological Area, can expect a full supply of water for the upcoming fall flood-up. However, although fall supplies are available on the books, water deliveries during December and early January may be impacted by the scheduled dewatering of the Delta-Mendota Canal during that time to enable maintenance and repairs on the canal to take place. Landowners and managers will be notified shortly about the scheduled delivery of water and will be kept apprised of any potential impacts to deliveries resulting from the DMC drawdown.

Part of the reason for receiving a good water supply, besides the fact it has been a wet year, is the five-year agreement entered into this summer by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the San Luis Delta-Mendota Water Authority with the Exchange Contractors. The agreement among these three entities allows the transfer of up to 80,000 acre-feet of water for use on refuges and wildlife areas, lands within the Grassland Resource Conservation District and local agriculture lands.

"Rather than competing with ag for the water transfer we've bonded together for the betterment of the local

*(Continued, page 4)*

## Grassland Notes

• **Wildlife Art Show** — Decoys of all types, antique, decorative and working, will be displayed at "The Art of the Decoy" exhibition, Sept. 5–Nov. 12, at the McHenry Museum, 14th and I Sts., Modesto. Admission is free. Hours: Noon–4 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. Carvings of shorebirds, waterfowl, seabirds, gamebirds, songbirds and fish will be shown, as will a rarely-shown collection of California Duck Stamp original paintings, on loan from the Department of Fish and Game. Sherrie Russell Meline, the 2006–2007 Federal Duck Stamp artist, will appear at the show Oct. 21–22. Decoys and wildlife art will be available for purchase from vendors and artists. The Event is co-sponsored by the Pacific Flyway Decoy Association and The McHenry Museum. Information: Jerry Urban, (209) 343-5223; [www.mchenrymuseum.org](http://www.mchenrymuseum.org).

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• **California Breeding Ducks Population Increases** — For the second consecutive year the state's breeding population of ducks increased by 6 percent from 615,000 to 649,000, according to the Department of Fish and Game. Within that number, breeding mallards increased from 318,000 to 399,000, a 26 percent jump. Biologist Melanie Weaver said mallard numbers moved above the long-term average by 7 percent for the first time in several years. "We expect good production this year and a larger fall flight because of the late, abundant spring rains," Weaver said. Fish and Game has conducted the in-state survey since 1955, covering duck nesting habitat in wetland and agricultural areas throughout California, including the Grasslands. Information: (916) 445-3717.

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• **Harvest Survey** — Forty-five clubs voluntarily provided their waterfowl harvest data for the 2005–2006 hunting season and results of the survey have been released by the Grassland Water District. Biologist Rich Wright compiled the survey. He reported 43,461 ducks harvested by 11,415 hunters in the combined North and South Grasslands, good for a 3.81 average. All data is kept strictly confidential and only district-wide results are published. Information: (209) 826-5188.



## ***Conditional Agricultural Waiver Allows Grassland Duck Clubs to Drain Water***

In order to comply with an Ag Waiver to enable landowners to drain their wetlands, the Grassland Water and Resource Conservation districts joined the Westside San Joaquin River Watershed Coalition back in 2003. The thought was private clubs could better comply with the requirements of the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board as part of a coalition, rather than attempt to obtain their own discharge permit in order to drain wetlands into the San Joaquin River.

The coalition has worked well, said Don Marciochi, general manager of the districts.

"The Westside San Joaquin River Watershed Coalition is doing a very good job with the water quality control board," Marciochi said. "Out of all the coalitions in the Central Valley, the one we belong to is among the most progressive and responsive. There certainly is a value and strength in numbers.

"In 2003 when the Ag Waiver was first enacted, the water quality board required a list of all those who operate farm ground, duck clubs or the like. In response, we joined the coalition and asked that our landowners within the districts to knowingly and affirmatively sign up and be covered for any discharge (wetlands draining) that occurred."

Marciochi said about 80 percent of the districts' landowners signed up. Now, Marciochi is contacting the remaining 20 percent of the landowners to sign up and be part of the coalition, or face "being left out in the cold" and having to obtain their own drainage permits on their own.

"We'll be actively contacting those landowners who haven't signed up," Marciochi said. "It won't cost them anything to sign on. It's a fairly simple process to be part of the coalition."

Any landowners who haven't previously knowingly and affirmatively signed up must do so by December 31, 2006 or face the daunting task of obtaining their own waiver and draining permit.

Under Phase II of the Conditional Ag Waiver, adopted by the Regional Board in December 2005, watershed coalitions beginning in July had to expand their toxicity sampling procedures to screen for more than 50 commonly used pesticides. The Regional Board

stepped up its water quality monitoring standards to include many of these commonly used pesticides as well as a number of other constituents.

Fortunately for Grasslands, the Westside Coalition to which it belongs, since its inception, has operated a comprehensive monitoring program that includes specific toxicity sampling. Since the beginning the Westside Coalition has been prepared to meet the rigorous standards, setting up monitoring crews and laboratories.

"The direction from our members, including the GWD and GRCD, has been to do a comprehensive monitoring program from the beginning," said Joe McGahan, coordinator for the Westside Coalition. "I think it has been acknowledged by the Regional Board that we have a comprehensive plan."

He said participating districts and their landowners are learning to adopt Best Management Practices to help reduce offsite movement of toxics and pesticides into affected waterways. There is evidence these practices are paying off.

It's up to all landowners within the GWD and GRCD to sign up as part of this highly effective coalition.

"Simply being a member of the GWD or GRCD does not cover landowners in the Ag Waiver process," Marciochi said. "Landowners must

### ***Fish and Game Effort to Control Mosquitoes***

California's Department of Fish and Game will use \$850,000, allocated for West Nile control, to reduce mosquito populations and the risk of disease on eight state wildlife areas. DFG has identified projects in cooperation with local vector control districts and work will begin as soon as possible, according to DFG Director Ryan Brodrick.

Projects on wildlife areas in the Grasslands include:

**Los Banos Wildlife Area:** water control structure replacement, \$45,000; vegetation management, \$30,000; and water management, \$50,000.

**North Grasslands Wildlife Area:** water control structure replacement, \$55,000; vegetation management, \$50,000.

knowingly and affirmatively sign up to be covered."

For information about the Conditional Ag Waiver and standards adopted by the Regional Board, contact Marciochi at the GWD office at (209) 826-5188.

### ***Flood Up Supply Good***

...(from page 3)

area," said Don Marciochi, general manager of the GWD/GRCD. "This agreement helps with the annual question, 'where is our water going to come from this year?' There's usually a dilemma getting Level 4 water but for the next five years, this problem has been partially resolved."

### ***Grassland Tour Promotes Understanding...***

...(from page 5)

rib lunch, sponsored by the Ken Grady Company, culminated the tour.

"We'll offer the Grassland Tour again in 2007," said Wright, who serves as a biologist for both CWA and the Grassland Water District. "If landowners are interested in receiving an invitation, contact me." Contact him at (209) 826-5188 or on his cell phone at (916) 275-1020.

### ***Grassland Water District Reorganizes Personnel***

The Grassland Water District has reorganized its top management-level staff, reports general manager Don Marciochi. The changes are effective immediately.

"We're aiming toward greater efficiency and looking to take advantage of the unique abilities of our staff members to be leaders," said Marciochi. "The moves will make it easier for landowners to know whom to contact."

Scott Lower is the GWD assistant general manager at (209) 704-5187.

There are three department managers:

- Veronica Woodruff, manager of administration at (209) 826-5188
- Kraig Lippincott, manager of construction at (209) 704-5190
- Rob Kocher, manager of water delivery at (209) 704-5191



## 2nd Grassland Tour Promotes Understanding of Wetlands

More than 25 landowners listened intently to Byron Hisey, president of the Hollister Club, as he led them through a narrow corridor of high vegetation and into a classic tule pond, where they received a lesson in wetland ecology.

The hands-on, in-the-field activity was the highlight of the 2nd annual Grasslands Tour, sponsored by the California Waterfowl Association, July 8. Admission was free.

Hisey, who is on the board of directors for the Grassland Water District, stressed the importance of having a diverse marsh. Summer water for brood habitat is one of the key habitat features of the Hollister Club.

After walking through tule ponds and open water cells, and observing the lush, diverse vegetation, the tour headed for Kesterson Wildlife Refuge and specifically to Swan Lake, permanent water that regularly molts hundreds of ducks each year.

Out from the lake stepped Jim Laughlin, a CWA biologist outfitted in neoprene waders, who was busily catching and banding ducks. The day was pretty warm and Laughlin and his two-man crew were sweating profusely, but they didn't seem to mind. They had trapped lots of birds that day.

"Would you believe it?" Laughlin asked. "We've trapped 10 different species of ducks at Swan Lake. That's what makes the Grasslands so special and unique. It's the diversity of birds."

The list of birds trapped and banded included widgeon, mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal, scaup, ringneck, red-

head, canvasback, ruddy and shoveler—all from a single 150-acre lake.

He hoisted a hen redhead duck for all to see, and then a young drake mallard, to prove his point. Then Laughlin showed the group how to age and sex birds, before recording the data and slipping on the proper-sized band.

"We caught more than 500 birds in our funnel traps at Swan Lake, close to half of the ducks we have banded in the Grasslands," Laughlin said. "It demonstrates clearly how densely ducks will use a pond for brooding and molting."

CWA's banding operation continued through Aug. 10 and crews this year banded more than 1,100 birds. Their banding operation was conducted on private clubs, as well as on state and federal lands. Clubs cooperating with the project included the Hollister, Gustine, Salinas, Coast Cattle, Manteca and Underwood in the North Grasslands and the Frog Pond, Frasher Farms, West Coast and Santa Cruz clubs in the South Grasslands.

The tour group also listened to reports by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Dennis Woolington and refuge manager Karl Stromayer, who said his agency received a \$10,000 grant to upgrade the blinds at Kesterson NWR.

CWA biologist Rich Wright and Hisey provided a summation of the morning tour and handed out helpful information on habitat management. They even provided a CWA broad-brimmed straw hat for everyone in attendance. A complimentary barbecued

*(Continued, page 4)*

*In the Field — Upper left, Byron Hisey leads habitat discussion on Hollister Club. Upper right, biologist Rich Wright emphasizes discing. Lower photos, biologist Jim Laughlin displays a banded mallard.*





Return Service Requested

July/August 2006



## ***\$400,000 Grant to Fund Major Watershed Planning...(from page 1)***

*shed Plans to Restore and Protect Our Waters.* The phase funded by the grant will focus on the foundational steps of building partnerships and characterizing the watershed. In later phases, the actual watershed plan document will be created and implemented.

### **Building Lasting Partnerships**

Interacting with the community in ways that will enhance community knowledge (and ultimately support) for protecting Grasslands resources is a key grant activity. Key-person interviews and facilitated stakeholder meetings will be used to identify concerns, priorities and desired outcomes consistent with long-term stewardship goals. With so much of the GEA and surrounding areas in private ownership, it is essential to engage private landowners in a process to discover and encourage their interest in preserving the biological and other values.

The grant also focuses increasing the involvement of young people in Grasslands issues. For instance, the grant would provide support for the existing grade-school educational program being carried out by the Grassland Environ-

mental Education Center. UC Merced students will have the ability to work on projects supportive of the watershed planning effort through engineering and science-related service learning projects. Service learning projects are part of a program initially developed by Purdue University, called Engineering Projects in Community Service.

### **Characterizing the Grasslands**

Though many studies have been completed in the GEA focusing on various resources and issues, there is no comprehensive inventory of the resource values of the GEA. A bibliography of existing studies and reports regarding the Grasslands as well as existing conservation efforts in the area will be compiled and made publicly available on the internet. Detailed mapping of biological and aquatic resources in the GEA will also be completed, including land ownership and management activities. This information will ultimately be used to identify specific projects to improve water quality in the watershed.

### **What's Next?**

GWD is currently in the process of

completing the contracting process with DWR so that the watershed planning process may begin in earnest. Starting this fall, the preliminary steps of gathering information from the community, creating an advisory committee and developing educational materials will begin. The current plan is to formally kick off the watershed planning process at the April 2007 Wild on Wetlands Festival.

GWD looks forward to working with the grant implementation team, which includes Ducks Unlimited, Chico State Geographical Information Center, Grassland Environmental Education Center, UC Merced, Sustain Environmental, EMT Associates/Center for Applied Research Services and Adams Broadwell Joseph & Cardozo, as well as all of the stakeholders interested in the Grasslands, to create a watershed-based stewardship plan for this locally, regionally and internationally important resource.

The following website includes the list of awardees and additional information about the grant program: <http://www.watershedrestoration.water.ca.gov/watersheds/grant.cfm>