

GRASSLAND TODAY

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Local Officials Tour Grasslands to Focus on Economic and Unique Wildlife Values

Steve Rath and Gary Hutsell stood quietly, as if they were mesmerized, looking from an observation platform high above a marsh that was teeming with ducks, shorebirds and raptors. The sights and sounds of the migratory birds were almost deafening.

The Los Banos officials—Rath, the city manager and Hutsell, superintendent of public works—were part of a 40-person tour of the Grasslands, sponsored by the Grassland Water District, to give them a sense of the tremendous wetland values located literally in their backyard. The Oct. 18 tour was timed to coincide with the development of General Plan updates currently under way for both the City of Los Banos and Merced County.

“The unique 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area is something not everyone is aware of,” said Don Marciochi, general manager of the GWD. “Touring the landscape, learning about the historical and economic values, and the critical habitat this area provides to over a million migratory birds can be a real eye-opener. These wetlands could be the best kept secret in the Central Valley.”

Marciochi said a land use and economics study in 2001 showed habitat management and wildlife-associated recreation contributes \$53.4 million to Merced County’s economy and accounts for about 1,100 jobs.

From the observation platform at Sprig Haven farms, Rath and Hutsell talked with Pepper Snyder, president of the GWD. “Look to the north,” Snyder said. “It’s five miles from here to Highway 152, and it’s all pristine wetlands. Our biggest threat to this priceless resource is encroachment and that’s why we wish to be partners in the development of the General Plan Update. Many people in Los Banos don’t know about the vulnerability of this area.”

Following a brief orientation, everyone loaded onto a large bus and began a tour of the wetlands. Scott Lower, assistant general manager of the GWD,

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Grand view — Pepper Snyder, president of the Grassland Water District (center), poses with Steve Rath, Los Banos City Manager (right), and Gary Hutsell, superintendent of public works, overlooking a vast expanse of wetlands from an observation platform at Sprig Haven Farms.

Future of State’s Wetlands Rests on Water Management

Jeff Kerry, who spent 20 years as a director of the Grassland Water District, is featured in an article titled, “Running on Empty,” in the November/December issue of *Ducks Unlimited Magazine*. The story focuses on the Grasslands, which supports more than 1 million dabbling ducks, and the fact that nowhere in the world do more waterfowl rely on a smaller wetland base than in the Central Valley.

The feature article found on page 88 is sobering and points out an undeniable truth: “In California, the future of wetlands and waterfowl hunting rests on how the state’s limited water supplies are managed.”

Is there any wonder that Ducks Unlimited ranks the Central Valley its No. 2 priority in the entire North American continent? Nearly two-thirds of the remaining 350,000 acres of wetlands are owned and managed by duck clubs. Half of the state’s remaining wetlands is located in the Grasslands of Merced County.

To date DU has helped restore or enhance more than 119,000 acres of wetlands on 204 projects in the Grasslands.

The article graphically shows the ability of organizations such as Grasslands Water District, Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture, Department of Fish and Game, Central Valley Project, Wildlife Conservation Board and others to restore and enhance wetlands and waterfowl habitat in the Central Valley is entirely contingent on water supplies.

“From the very beginning waterfowl hunters have had to fight to keep water flowing into the Grasslands,” Kerry said.

Dave Widell, former assistant general manager of the GWD and current director of conservation policy for Ducks Unlimited’s western regional office in Sacramento, said, “We’ve had great success putting wetlands habitat back on the landscape through WRP, NAWCA and other conservation pro-

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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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Conversion complete — Wetland Reserve Program on the Accornero Club turned agricultural lands back to habitat for wildlife.

DU and Partners Conserve Vital Grasslands Habitat

With more than 90% of California's original wetlands lost to the plow or strip mall, wetland conservationists struggle to turn the tide. This past year saw the restoration and protection of over 650 acres of crucial waterfowl habitat on two projects through the Wetland Reserve Program.

This important wetland program works with farmers to restore marginal cropland back into its former state, wetlands and associated uplands.

Funded through the Farm Bill with appropriations from Congress, WRP is administered by USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service. Ducks Unlimited and other partners were happy to play a vital role.

Two WRP projects in the Grasslands, the Accornero and Newman, were recently completed and are already providing habitat. On the Accornero project, Ducks Unlimited staff worked closely with NRCS and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel on project design and construction and received grant funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to help fund the effort. Specifically, DU staff provided in-kind services such as topographical surveys, engineering plans, construction staking and supervision, and miscellaneous technical assistance. Part of this project involved restoring 240 acres of wetlands, which was completed last year.

Much of last year's work was funded through the USFWS, which received grant funds from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. This year, DU and partners completed the wetland project by restoring nearly 80 acres that had previously been in a farming operation.

The restored habitat consists of seasonal and semi-permanent wetlands and associated uplands. Management of the

habitat will be consistent with nearby managed lands and will include moist soil management, brood rearing habitat, and some managed uplands to benefit nesting waterfowl, pheasants and other upland bird species.

The habitat will be operated in conjunction with the existing duck club and this critical wetland habitat is now protected in perpetuity from being developed thanks to WRP and the USFWS's conservation easement program.

Just a few miles north, near the China Island Wildlife Area, the Newman WRP project restored over 340 acres of habitat. This project is part of the historic Newman Gun Club, which recently celebrated its 75th anniversary. The project area included marginal cropland and dryland pasture the club purchased recently to support their agricultural production and cattle operation.

Realizing they could qualify for assistance to restore the land back into wetlands, they jumped at the opportunity and enlisted the help of NRCS and others. Again, using the powerful WRP program to spearhead the project, NRCS, DU and USFWS staff forged ahead.

With important grant funds provided by WCB, DU conducted preliminary topographical surveys and developed conceptual project plans, which the partners used to arrive at the final plans en route to construction.

Additional grant funds provided by NRCS and USFWS helped restore habitat consisting of seasonal wetlands, riparian sloughs, and associated uplands. As with the Accornero project, the Newman Gun Club will add this newly restored habitat into their hunting operation, which is all protected in perpetuity through easements.

For information on Ducks Unlimited conservation efforts in the San Joaquin Valley, contact Chris Hildebrandt at the Grasslands office at 209-826-5274.

Special “After Season” Youth Hunts, Feb. 3-4

This year’s federally designated, “after season” youth waterfowl hunts are scheduled Feb. 3–4, 2007. On these dates junior hunters, boys and girls under 16 years, may hunt ducks and geese in California.

Most state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges in Merced County will operate special youth shoots. There are no entry fees. To learn about these opportunities call the Los Banos Wildlife Area between 7:30 a.m.–4 p.m., at (209) 826-0463.

Many privately owned duck clubs

will also offer hunts exclusively for youth. If you don’t belong to a private club but would want access to one, contact the California Waterfowl Association at (916) 648-1406. They’ll help make arrangements for you.

During the youth shoot only boys and girls who possess a valid Junior Hunting License may carry or discharge a firearm. Hunting regulations and bag limits apply. Youth hunters do not need either a federal or state duck stamp.

A non-hunting, supervising adult must accompany the youth shooters.

Grassland Waterfowl Harvest Survey Results

Forty-five clubs have 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.

Wright thanked all clubs for collecting and voluntarily giving the harvest data.

“The data you record is critical in

assessing annual and long-term trends in hunter success,” Wright said. “Without this information it is difficult to evaluate and discuss the quality of hunting on private duck clubs in the Grasslands.”

He encourages clubs to continue collecting harvest data and to ask neighboring clubs to participate in the survey, as well. All data is kept strictly confidential and only district-wide results are published. To learn more about the waterfowl harvest survey, contact Wright at (209) 826-5188.

Fish and Game Commission Recognizes Hall of Fame

The California Fish and Game Commission, at its August meeting, has officially recognized the newly formed California Waterfowlers Hall of Fame and its first class of inductees.

The Waterfowlers Hall of Fame was established to honor those individuals who have made significant contributions toward enhancing waterfowl resources in the state.

“It is an honor for the commission to formally recognize the professionals, legislators, sportsmen, agriculturists and other conservationists who have sacrificed in the past, and those who will contribute to the future to California’s waterfowl resources.”

Inductees include: Bert McKee, 1904–1991, who served as president of Ducks Unlimited and dedicated 54 years to waterfowl conservation; Bill Ready, 1938–2001, who served as president of California Waterfowl Association and spent 36 years working for the resource; Bob Eberhardt, 1927–1994, who served as president of Ducks Unlimited; Dennis Raveling, 1939–1991,

professor of wildlife at University of California, Davis, who inspired a commitment to waterfowl among his students; Harvey Sorensen, 1899–1979, the co-founder and past president of Ducks Unlimited; Warren Rienecker, 1927–1991, who served as a waterfowl biologist for more than 30 years with the state Department of Fish and Game.

For information about the Waterfowlers Hall of Fame contact John Carlson at the Fish and Game Commission at (916) 653-4899.

Waterfowl Migrations

A new and comprehensive book titled, *Flyways, A Celebration of Waterfowl and Wetlands*, has been published by Ducks Unlimited. It features the writing and photography of Gary Kramer.

The “coffee table” volume is available in soft cover for \$26.90 and hardcover for \$34.90, directly from the author, who signs each book. Send order to: Gary Kramer, P.O. Box 903, Willows, CA 95988. Information: (530) 934-3873; www.garykramer.net.

President Signs Wildlife Conservation Measures

As Congress wrapped up business before adjourning for 2006, they approved a number of bills related to wildlife conservation. Here’s a rundown on measures signed into law by President Bush.

Highlights include passage of S.260, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Act, which authorizes the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, a successful cooperative venture that provides funding to private landowners to conduct to conservation activities. The so-called “partners program” has grown over the years and current appropriations exceed \$50 million.

The PFWA provides official endorsement of existing U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners program that provides technical and financial assistance to private landowners to enhance wildlife habitat on their lands. The program, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2007, has become extremely popular with landowners in the Grasslands.

Another important bill that passed is H.R. 5539, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act Reauthorization. Commonly referred to as NAWCA, this law reaffirms a popular program that funds wetlands conservation across the continent, including Canada and Mexico. The program receives appropriations exceeding \$40 million per year that are matched well beyond the 1:1 match required in the law.

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act was reauthorized at a funding level of \$75 million through fiscal year 2011. For the past three years both California Waterfowl Association and Ducks Unlimited have received separate \$1 million NAWCA awards for conservation effort in the northern San Joaquin Valley.

“We are pleased to see the Congress acting on these legislative issues that move conservation forward,” said H. Dale Hall, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “These laws enhance our work with partners to implement on the ground conservation efforts.”

For additional information contact Sean Milar, biologist, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos at (209) 826-3508.



En masse — More than 15,000 sandhill cranes have migrated to Merced National Wildlife Refuge, a major stronghold for the large wading birds.

Best Wildlife Show in San Joaquin Valley

The fall migration has peaked in the northern San Joaquin Valley, giving wildlife enthusiasts a great day afield, albeit with binoculars.

At San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge you can see Aleutian Canada geese in numbers exceeding 100,000 birds. To reach an observation tower take Highway 132 west of Modesto and then Gates Road north. Turn west on Beckwith Road and continue to the tower.

At Merced NWR, off Highway 140, you can see more than 15,000 sandhill cranes along a four-mile vehicle tour route. There are thousands of white-fronted, snow and Ross' geese, too, as well as occasional sightings of bald eagles and peregrine falcons.

At San Luis NWR off Highway 165, there are two all-weather roads—the Tule Elk Loop and the Waterfowl Loop—excellent venues for seeing a remnant herd of about 50 tule elk and thousands of migratory ducks and geese. It's fun to see how many different species you can find on a single trip.

Entry to the refuges is free. Each offers observation towers, hiking and signed interpretive trails, kiosks and interpretive panels, plus vault toilets and parking areas. For a complete run-down on activities and facilities, and directional maps, check out the website: www.fws.gov/sanluis or call the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos at (209) 826-3508.

Education Center Needs \$35,000 for Building

The Grassland Environmental Education Center, a popular destination for thousands of school children each year, is searching for funds to buy a new modular facility.

Officials at the Grassland Water District, one of the sponsors of the center, said \$50,000 to buy a building has already been secured.

"We need \$35,000 to cover the entire \$85,000 cost," said spokesperson Veronica Woodruff. "Site preparation is completed and a pad for the 24- by 60-foot building has been poured. All we need is the structure and we're back in business."

The new site is on Fish and Game

property at Los Banos Wildlife Area, where signed hiking trails and an interpretive marsh have been created for groups of visiting school children.

"As soon as we can buy the building school tours can start again, almost immediately. Everything is in place," Woodruff said.

Focus of the curriculum is the role hunters and agriculture play in the preservation of Grassland wetlands, and the immense wildlife values found in Merced County.

For further information about the environmental education center or how you may donate, contact Woodruff at (209) 826-5188.

Grassland Notes

• **Getting the Lead Out** — A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study suggests the nationwide ban on the use of lead shot for waterfowl hunting has had remarkable success. Six years after lead shot was banned in 1991 researchers estimated there was a 64 percent decline in lead poisoning deaths of surveyed mallard ducks and a 78 percent decline in lead pellet ingestion.

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• **Grassland Preseason Waterfowl Numbers** — Every year, DFG conducts a preseason waterfowl survey. This year's numbers were very impressive, totaling 504,840 waterfowl. As usual, pintail were the most numerous birds at 252,700, followed by northern shovellers at 128,545 and green-winged teal at 77,975. Private lands were very successful in establishing tradition and consequently holding the lion's share of birds. North and South Grassland club counts reached 440,560 waterfowl.

* * *

• **Early Season Hunting Reports** — Reports from hunters on the opening weekend were generally positive, with most people filling out their bag limit. Many people reported seeing "lots and lots of spoonbills," commented GWD/CWA biologist Rich Wright. "The opener was good, but the real story was how the shooting didn't seem to tail off as usual," Wright said. "Many clubs saw excellent shooting for 5-7 shoot days before things slowed up and some clubs never did slow up much. I am guessing the late rice harvest in the Sacramento Valley, coupled with good wetland conditions in the Grasslands enticed an above average number of birds."

* * *

• **Junior Duck Stamp Gains Support** — In continuing its support of youth education the Grassland Water District has, once again, helped sponsor the Junior Duck Stamp Program. Under the program the California Waterfowl Association produces 15,000 calendars, 15,000 newsletters, 10,000 posters and 10,000 folders, all promoting conservation education and encouraging students to create waterfowl artwork. In addition to prizes for winning students, sponsor funds also support Flyway Journeys Fellowships, where selected students study wildlife and art in Canada's Delta Marsh. Information: (916) 648-1406.

Local Officials Tour Grasslands...(continued from page 1)

spoke about the history of the wetlands in the 1850s when the vast region was flooded naturally by the San Joaquin and Kings rivers.

Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, said the Grasslands represented “the narrow waist of an hour-glass on the Pacific Flyway.

“Ninety-five percent of our wetlands in the Central Valley have disappeared,” Forrest said. “The Grasslands encompasses about half of the wetlands that still exist; wild lands that are critical to the survival of migratory birds.”

She said Swainson’s hawks that use the Grasslands migrate to Argentina, shorebirds migrate as far as Patagonia and waterfowl all the way to the Boreal Forest of Canada and Alaska.

“Human impact is so important here,” Forrest said. “This is a place of quiet nights and grand vistas that needs protection. We need to be talking with and partnering with city and county officials about preserving the GEA from development and growth, and working together to make wise land use decisions.”

John Beam, senior biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game, said Merced County is “fortunate to have this landscape.” He said the Los Banos Wildlife Area, established in 1929, was the state’s first wildlife area, an indication that government leaders more than 75 years ago recognized the importance of the wetlands.

Beam said, “We are seeing pressure from development, no doubt. But there is time to save this resource.”

Dave Widell, director of public policy for Ducks Unlimited, told officials that good quality, well-timed water is critical to the GEA. “So are buffer areas—open space and agricultural lands surrounding the wetlands,” he said. “Buffers are as critical as the wetlands themselves. That’s the real issue that needs discussion and understanding. We want to bring these values to the table.”

Gloria Bettencourt, a Merced County planning commissioner, took advantage of a stop at San Luis National Wildlife Area, walking a trail and jumping thousands of ducks and even some early-migrating white-fronted geese. In the distance, the mourning calls of sandhill cranes filled the air.



In the field — Merced County planning commissioners **Gloria Bettencourt** and **Steve Sloan** viewed wildlife at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge.

“I’ve taken my family for walks out here in the wetlands, but it has been a while,” Bettencourt said. “There’s something about taking time out and getting outside with nature. It’s just fabulous.”

At the tour’s conclusion, at lunch, former Los Banos mayor Mike Amabile said, “I’ve worked with Grasslands and fostered partnerships with them to protect this valuable resource the last 12 years.”

In a follow-up letter, Los Banos City Manager Rath wrote, “The City Council and staff thank you for the partnership that has developed in support of the district’s and city’s goals to stay focused on the preservation of wetland resources and the quality of life for our community. Thank you for sponsoring the wetlands tour. It was a great educational experience and a chance to network with everyone while enjoying the valuable wetland resource that surrounds our community.”



Now hear this — **Kim Forrest**, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex (left), talks about critical habitat issues.

Merced County Supervisors have invited the Grassland Resource Conservation District to assist with preparation of the General Plan Update by participating on an Open Space/Habitat Focus Group and the Grassland Water District to be part of a Water Resources Focus Group.

The Merced County General Plan Update project began in May 2006 and will be completed in early 2009. The plan will cover a broad range of issues involving land use, growth, environment and the quality of life within the county over the next 20 years.



After the tour — Los Banos City Council members **Roger Pruitt** (left) and **Anna Brooks** confirm with Merced County supervisor **Jerry O’Banion** (second from right) and **John Le Van**, planning manager for Los Banos, about the development of the Merced County General Plan Update.

Return Service Requested

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Future of State's Wetlands... (from page 1)

grams. But more water will be needed to restore additional habitat in the future.

"In the short term DU and its partners will have to pool their resources and buy additional water on the open market to meet our wetland management needs, especially during the spring and summer," Widell said. "In the long term we will have to work with other partners to develop new sources of water for wildlife. Urbanization will only make water more expensive and without new supplies, water will eventually become too costly for conservation interests to afford."

The plight of the Grassland wetlands is only too obvious, with threats from urban sprawl, high-speed rail, highways, industrial development, encroachment and looming water shortages.

The DU article comes at a time when the Grassland Water District is working directly with Merced County and nearby cities to develop a General Plan Update.

"Blueprint" for San Joaquin Valley Seeks Public Input

Merced County Association of Governments has initiated a unique planning project called the San Joaquin Valley Regional Blueprint and asked the Grassland Water District to be a part of the valley-wide planning process.

"The goal of the Blueprint planning process is to develop a preferred future vision for the region," said Jesse Brown, executive director of the MCAG.

Brown said the MCAG, together with seven other councils of government throughout the San Joaquin Valley, and in partnership with the Great Valley Center and San Joaquin Valley Air District, is activating a vast public outreach effort as part of the process.

"Using a bottom-up approach, the Blueprint Planning process will develop a vision for how the San Joaquin Valley should look in the year 2050, and then evaluate approaches, policies and programs to achieve that vision," Brown said.

Topics to be considered under the plan include population growth, eco-

nomics development, environmental preservation, land use, traffic congestion and air quality, among others.

Don Marciochi, general manager of the GWD, said he welcomes the opportunity to become involved in the far-reaching plan as part of the district's efforts to ensure the preservation and conservation of the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area.

For information about the planning process contact Marjie Kirn, Blueprint Project manager, at (209) 723-3153; marjie@mcag.cog.ca.us.

Save the Date for the Landowners Meeting

The annual Grassland Landowners Meeting has been scheduled far in advance to insure a good turnout. The session is planned for May 19, 2007 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's Association complex on Mercey Springs Rd., Los Banos. Admission is free. Information: Veronica Woodruff, (209) 826-5188.