

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

Vol. 17, No. 1

www.grasslandwetlands.com

January/February 2007

General Manager Retires Following 34 Years with Grassland Water District

Don Marciochi, a pivotal leader in bringing a reliable, year-round supply of good quality water to the Grassland Ecological Area of Merced County, recently announced his retirement after 34 years with the Grassland Water District, the last 24 as its general manager.

During his long tenure at the helm of the water district, based in Los Banos—the only district of its kind in California to provide water specifically for wetlands and wildlife—Marciochi played an important role in the development and implementation of the refuge provisions of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act. The act resulted in a GWD contract with the federal government for a firm water supply each year totaling 180,000 acre-feet.

“This water supply, probably more than anything else, is responsible for the resurgence of the Grasslands, the largest contiguous, historic wetland in the Central Valley and wintering home to more than 1 million waterfowl, wading birds and shorebirds, and many endangered species,” Marciochi said. “The GWD provides water, not only to privately held wetlands, but to state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges, an effort for which I am extremely proud to have been a part.”

A study commissioned in 2000 by the water district showed Merced County wetlands did much more than strictly benefit wildlife resources, boosting the local economy each year by \$53.4 million and sustaining upwards of 1,100 jobs.

Pepper Snyder, president of the GWD board of directors, thanked Marciochi for his dedication and accomplishing “so many wonderful things” for Merced County’s wildlife resources.

“He helped the Grasslands overcome a woefully inadequate water supply in the mid-1980s and later fought the difficult issues of selenium contamination and urban encroachment,” Snyder said. “Don was very adept at working with various governmental entities to ensure

the perpetuation of the wetlands.” Snyder said he’ll announce the selection of a new general manager on February 26.

Marciochi called the GWD’s close working relationship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Fish and Game “a key component of the ongoing effort to protect, restore and enhance the Grasslands.”

Working closely with Ducks Unlimited and the California Waterfowl Association over the past decade, Marciochi helped secure funding through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and separately through an agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to rehabilitate and improve the water delivery system in the Grasslands. During the last two years, he helped develop and implement a Water Management Plan to more effectively and efficiently manage the district’s water supply.

“We’ve also taken a pro-active approach in the management of our wetlands drain water through the installation of a real-time monitoring system, designed to help improve the quality of water in the San Joaquin River,” Marciochi said. “The efforts to manage water efficiently and effectively are ongoing.”

He said the water district is close to revising its drainage agreement with the City of Los Banos and is working on a buffer zone for the Grasslands that he hopes will be part of the 25-year General

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Retiring: Don Marciochi



Taking Helm: Dave Widell

Dave Widell Named New General Manager

David Widell, former Assistant Secretary to the California Resources Agency and Deputy Director of California State Parks, has been selected as the new general manager of the Grassland Water District.

Widell will oversee all operational aspects of the 75,000-acre water and resource conservation districts. Widell will also work toward the protection of

the much larger Grasslands Ecological Area with other state, federal and local agencies.

He is no stranger to local politics and issues, having graduated from Los Banos High School in 1985 and Modesto Junior College in 1987, before attaining a BA degree in political history from UC Davis in 1990. He is a former

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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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Grasslands Numbers Dip State's Ducks Total 4.1 Million

The annual Mid-Winter Waterfowl Survey, flown on Jan. 3, 2007 over northern San Joaquin Valley wetlands, from Mendota on the south to China Island on the north, found 32 percent fewer ducks than the 2006 count.

Surveyors could find only 626,851 ducks compared with 918,550 the previous year. Among dabbling species, only pintail and green-winged teal were spotted in greater numbers. Green-wing numbers, in fact, represented nearly 50 percent their kind found statewide.

Among the diving species, only canvasback were found this year to be in greater numbers, up 33 percent in the survey. It wasn't by coincidence, therefore, that canvasback figured more prominently in hunters' bags this season. In the statewide picture, the Grasslands held close to 45 percent of all the cans.

In spite of the Mid-Winter Survey's low bird numbers, hunting was generally good in most parts of the Grasslands, be it on private clubs or public shooting areas. Reason for seemingly incongruous equation—fewer birds, greater harvest—is directly attributed to the extremely dry winter. There was no casual water and the entire East Grasslands was dry, without typical winter flooding. In short, the birds were concentrated in smaller areas.

The Northern San Joaquin Valley flight is just part of a much larger attempt to count birds on the entire Pacific Flyway. California's contribution to the survey is led by coordinator Mike Wolder, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, at Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Willows.

Wolder said this year's statewide counts for the Mid-Winter Inventory had a total of 4.1 million ducks. "The total was slightly better than last year's 3.9 million," Wolder said. "The number of birds in the inventory is definitely above the 10-year average, a very positive indicator."

Wolder said the stable duck counts of the surveys the past five years is very good. He was pleased to see "a bump in pintail numbers to more than 1.5 million, the largest number since 2001 and the fourth year in a row the species has exceeded 1 million birds."

He estimated there was possibly 20 percent less flooded rice this winter in the Sacramento Valley and close to 50 percent reductions in some areas. That



Mid-Winter Inventory — Duck count is greater than 10-year average. Pintail numbers increase.

coupled with little rain helped to concentrate the ducks and made them relatively easy to count. "It was pretty darned dry compared to previous years," Wolder said.

He said most species, except for pintail, were relatively unchanged from 2006 counts. Among the most prominent species, mallards numbered 386,000 versus 417,000 and gadwall, 168,000 versus 200,000. Green-winged teal were strong with more than 502,000 counted.

The only dabbling species to take a big hit were wigeon, with approximately 525,000 birds, down from 672,000.

"Remember the Mid-Winter is just a one-time survey," Wolder said. "A lot of birds can shift around day to day and week to week. The most encouraging thing to come from the data are the pintail numbers, which indicate the species is maintaining itself and hopefully, will represent an increase above the low term. We're not really scratching the plateau where pintail used to be, about 2.4 million wintering in California, back in the 1970s."

Goose numbers appear strong and bode well for the species. White-fronted geese numbered more than 400,000 and white geese—a combination of snow and Ross—topped 650,000.

For information about the statewide Mid-Winter Inventory, contact Wolder at (530) 934-2801.

Project to Study Effects of Delayed Spring Drawdown

Interagency cooperative effort to investigate wetland responses to a modified hydrology with respect to salinity management in the San Joaquin River.

by Rick Ortega
Project Coordinator

The 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area constitutes the largest contiguous wetlands left in California. It is a significant waterfowl wintering area, supporting peak waterfowl populations in excess of one million birds, as well as an important fall and spring migration stopover site for shorebirds.

Wetlands in the San Joaquin Valley are intensively managed to produce standing crops of moist soil food plants and invertebrates with high value to wildlife, particularly waterfowl.

The most abundant moist soil plant managed and selected for in the Grassland Wetlands is swamp timothy. Management for swamp timothy requires flooding in the fall, typically in August and September, and the retaining of ponded water throughout the winter to provide foraging and loafing habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds and other marsh-birds. In the spring, between mid-March and early April, when soil temperatures are high enough for optimal swamp timothy seed germination and plant growth, these wetlands are drained.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board has adopted a conditional waiver of Waste Discharge Requirements for discharges from irrigated lands, which requires characterization of wetland water quality and a salt and boron Total Maximum Daily Limit, limiting the amount of salt and boron that can be discharged into the San Joaquin River at certain times of the year.

Wetland managers are concerned that altering the hydrology in these managed wetlands will adversely impact the productivity of these wetlands over time. Project participants are taking a proactive approach by investigating the potential affects of a modified hydrology by draining their wetlands later in the spring when there is assimilative capacity in the San Joaquin River.

The focus of this study is to investigate the impact of a delayed spring drawdown of swamp timothy managed wetlands to plant productivity and waterbird use in the Grassland Wetlands within the Lower San Joaquin River Watershed.

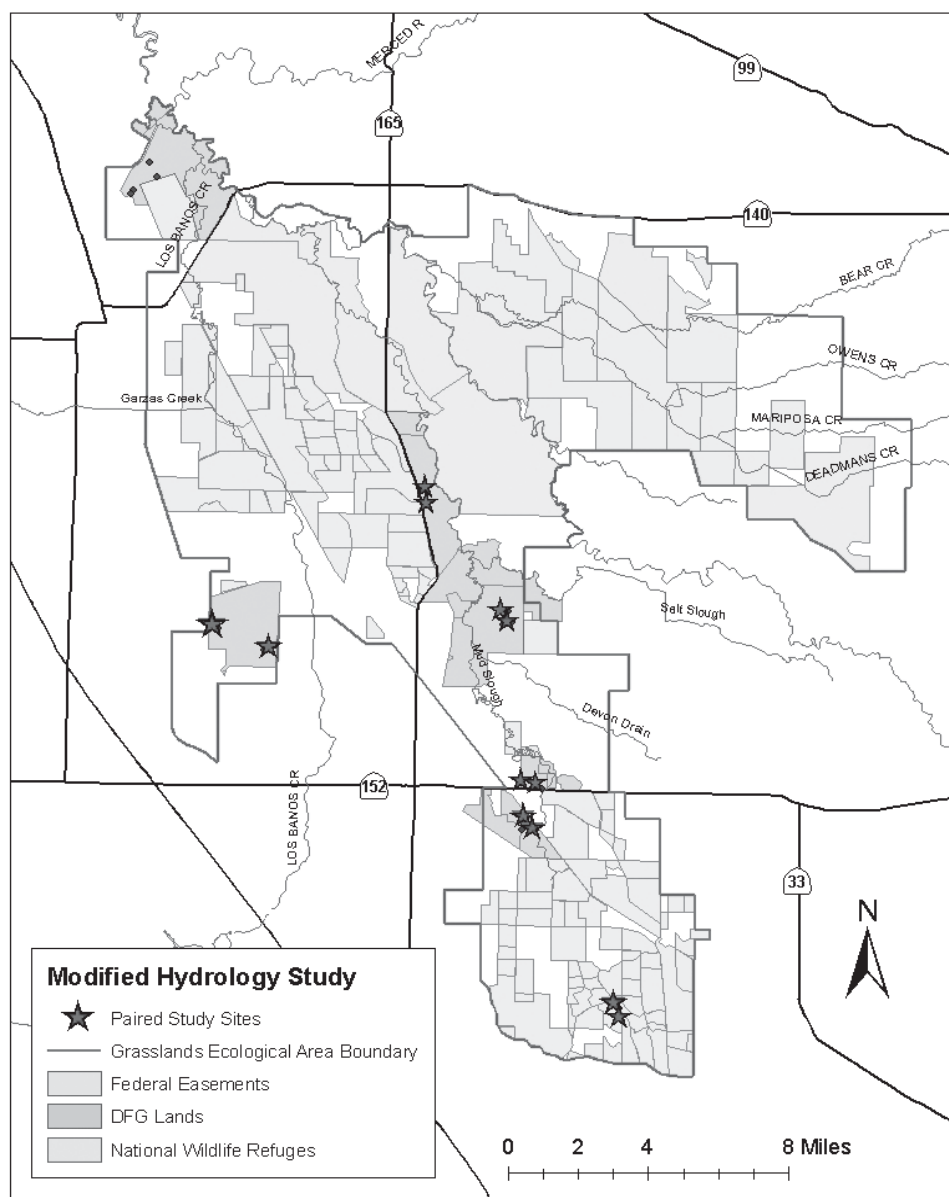
The goal of this project is to determine how wetland productivity, water quality and waterbird use is impacted by changes in traditional management of swamp timothy wetlands within the Grassland Ecological Area. Water quality monitoring stations at each of the study sites' supply and drainage points are collecting electro conductivity, temperature and flow data to characterize both the normal and modified water management.

Vegetation surveys including seed production sampling and habitat distribution monitoring are being conducted on a yearly basis to monitor wetland plant productivity responses. In addition, twice weekly waterbird usage surveys are being conducted to characterize late spring usage on the sites undergoing the delayed drawdown.

This project's 12 paired study sites encompass 600 acres of state and privately owned swamp timothy managed wetlands in the Grassland Wetlands of Merced County. Government agencies and private organizations participating directly in this proactive investigation in adaptive management include the Ducky Strike private duck club, Grassland Water District, California Department of Fish and Game, Department of Water Resources, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Cal Fed, University of California Davis, University of California Merced, and California State University Fresno.

Public Real-Time Preliminary Water Quality Monitoring Data Website

Link - <http://www.ysieconet.com/public/WebUI/Default.aspx?hidCustomerID=99>



Most Agree: Waterfowl Hunting was “Best in Years”

Trying to figure the movements of waterfowl is like attempting to put your thumb on mercury. It’s darned impossible to do.

Consider the findings of the Mid-Winter Inventory—the annual aerial survey of waterfowl taken in early January—that found 200,000 fewer waterfowl in the northern San Joaquin Valley than in 2006. The survey found pintail and wigeon in very short supply. However, the green-winged teal count was strong, accounting for more than 40 percent of the tiny ducks in the entire state.

In spite of 25 percent fewer birds in the Mid-Winter Inventory for our part of the Central Valley, waterfowl hunting for most gunners was considered “the best in years.” How could this be, you ask?

Rich Wright, biologist for the Grassland Water District, confirmed the anecdotal reports saying, “The 2006–2007 hunting season was one of our better years in recent memory.” He cited little water in the foothills and the East Grasslands, where birds tend to concentrate in normal years.

Bill Cook, manager of Los Banos Wildlife Area, said, “Our hunter numbers, birds harvested and daily birds-per-hunter averages were the highest since 1976. Hunters on Merced County public areas seemed to be pretty happy.”

Hunters on privately-owned marshes also seemed pleased. “I’d call the hunting superb,” said Mike McCabe of the Hollister Club. Paul Mazelli on the neighboring Gustine Club said, “I’ve been a member here for 20 years and this was by far the best season ever, there were so many birds.”

Pintails continued their trend of using the Grasslands early in the fall in very large numbers, before departing northward to the Delta and Sacramento Valley in late December and January. Wright said pintail shooting was better than last year because of an improved hatch in Canada, resulting in more juvenile birds in the population.

“Diving ducks were another bright spot for the Grasslands,” Wright said. “Many clubs in the South Grasslands found canvasback hunting way above average. In fact, some clubs shot more canvasback than pintail. Who would have ever believed it?”

While green-winged teal numbered more than 220,000 and contributed heavily to the hunters’ bag, mallard counts were down in the Grasslands, resulting in fewer birds taken this year.

About mallards, Wright said, “We know the counts were down compared to previous years. It will be interesting to see the juvenile-to-adult ratio once wing counts are completed. The ratio of young birds is an indicator of local production.”

For additional questions about hunting and bird numbers, contact Wright at (209) 826-5188. He asks private clubs to voluntarily provide him harvest data from the just-completed hunting season. “Individual club data is kept strictly confidential,” he said. “We use the collected data to show trends in all parts of the Grasslands and for recommending habitat changes to improve bird distribution.”



Youth Hunts Successful — Even boys and girls under 16 enjoyed exceptional shooting, Feb. 3–4, during their special “post-season” hunt.



Grassland Notes

• **Get Set to Go Wild!** — The annual Wild on Wetlands Festival is planned for April 14, with headquarters at Henry Miller Plaza at the intersection of H and 6th Sts., in Los Banos. The festival is free. Sponsors include the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce, state Depts. of Fish and Game and Parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Los Banos Enterprise and Grassland Water District.

A large tent will contain exhibits, interactive displays and informational booths. Handout materials will provide participants information for self-touring the incredible Grassland Ecological Area.

Participants may climb aboard large buses and take the “Grasslands Grand Tour,” with stops at several state wildlife areas, national wildlife refuges and privately-owned wetlands. Three-hour bus tours depart promptly at 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. Pre-registering for the “Grassland Grand Tour” is recommended.

Information: www.losbanos.com. E-mail to: info@losbanos.com. Call toll-free, (800) 336-6354.

* * *

• **Implementation Plan** — The Central Valley Joint Venture’s 2006 Implementation Plan will present habitat and management objects for multiple bird groups based on the best science available. The plan will serve to direct CVJV activities during the next five years, until the next plan update. The Central Valley stretches 450 miles, covering 10 million acres, or about 10 percent of the entire state.

Frederic Reid of Ducks Unlimited, management board chair of the CVJV, said the valley provides some of the most important bird habitat in North America, hosting one of the largest concentrations of migratory birds in the world during fall and winter.

The 2006 plan brings together research, monitoring data and evaluation from many sources and represents the combined expertise of a wide range of professionals from conservation organizations, state and federal agencies and the private sector.

Plans are available in CD format and through a link on the joint venture web site: www.cvjuv.org.

Widell Takes District Helm...*(continued from page 1)*

field representative to Assemblyman Rusty Areias; City of Los Banos Planning Commissioner; and director on the Merced County Farm Bureau Board. He previously served as the assistant general manager for Grassland Water District following service in the United States Air Force.

"I am excited to be coming home to work for Grasslands and the 180,000-acre wetlands complex, the largest ecological area of its kind on the Pacific Flyway," Widell said. "In an era where water is in such short supply and urban development is quickly changing the landscape, the challenges of protecting and enhancing the values of this unique resource are extremely important to me."

In announcing Widell's selection, water district board president Pepper Snyder said, "Dave has a love of the district and dedication for wetlands. He brings a wealth of experiences from his work with governmental agencies and conservation organizations that is unparalleled. His knowledge is invaluable as we face land use issues in the future."

Widell brings broad experiences to the position, including extended service with conservation organizations. Currently he is finishing up work with Ducks Unlimited as its director of conservation policy. Previously he served as chief deputy director of governmental

affairs for California Waterfowl Association.

Retiring general manager of the Grassland Water District, Don Marciochi, said he's worked closely with Widell for more than 15 years.

"He has the ability to work with complex issues and possesses the passion for the wetland resource that is vital," Marciochi said. "With the ever-present challenges facing the Grasslands, Dave Widell brings the perfect combination of experience, intellect, and dedication that is needed to keep the District moving forward."

General Manager Retires... *(from page 1)*

Plan Updates currently being undertaken by the City of Los Banos and the whole of Merced County.

Marciochi will continue to serve the GWD as a consultant, assisting the new general manager with special projects and helping with the transition.

"Over my 34 years, I've seen the district grow into an organization in which everyone associated with it—our landowners, board members and staff—can take pride," Marciochi said. "We've come a long way in our goals to perpetuate, sustain and protect the Grasslands."

Ducks Unlimited Readies \$1,000,000 Proposal

Looking to add to the success of recent projects completed with grant funds received through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Ducks Unlimited and its partners are developing another proposal seeking funds to restore and enhance wetlands and associated habitats in the San Joaquin Valley.

Focus areas for this proposal are the Grasslands Ecological Area and Tulare Basin. DU biologists and engineers hope to work with state and federal agencies, the Grassland Water District, and private partners to conserve a wide variety of habitats and benefit public and private partners.

DU has already begun reviewing potential projects with agencies and the District, and a few private landowners. The types of projects being solicited are wetland restoration projects in which we restore marginal cropland or other degraded land back into wetlands and associated habitats, or large scale wetland enhancement projects, such as rehabilitating the infrastructure on an entire duck club to allow optimal management for waterfowl and other wetlands associated wildlife.

If you or someone you know owns land in the project area and wants to restore or enhance existing wetlands, contact Chris Hildebrandt, DU Regional biologist at (209) 761-8400.

DU Biologist Wins Conservaton Award

Chris Hildebrandt, San Joaquin Valley regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited, is the 2006 winner of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Wetlands Conservation Award.

His nomination and selection were based on his success in submitting and implementing numerous North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants, which have cumulatively resulted in the protection, enhancement and restoration of thousands of acres of wetlands, riparian and upland habitats.

Hildebrandt was nominated for the prestigious award by the Central Valley Joint Venture said Bob Shaffer, coordinator of the CVJV. Previous award recipients were Chadd Santere of California Waterfowl Association and Chris Unkel of The Nature Conservancy. Information: (916) 414-6459.

Mark the Calendar

Annual Landowner Meeting Scheduled for May 19

The annual Grassland landowner meeting will start at 8:30 a.m., May 19 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's clubhouse on Mercey Springs Road. Admission is free.

The agenda will include topics such as:

- 2006–2007 waterfowl harvest results
- Encroachment, development and other land use threats
- San Joaquin River drainage study
- Outlook for spring irrigation, summer brood water and fall flood up
- Best habitat management practices
- Water district levee maintenance and vegetation control

- Agency and non-profit organization reports
- Presentation of the J. Martin Winton Award

Meeting coordinator Veronica Woodruff said there will be informational handouts and exhibits, as well as time for one-on-one discussion with water district staff and wildlife scientists.

"The meeting will extend to about noon, with ample time for landowners to speak directly with agency personnel," Woodruff said. "The issues of owning, maintaining and protecting wetlands have never been more complex, so participating in this meeting is vital."

An optional buffet lunch at \$12 must be reserved in advance by contacting the Grassland Water District, (209) 826-5188.

Return Service Requested

January/February 2007



New Coordinator for Grassland Environmental Education Center

Candace Sigmond is the new coordinator of the Grassland Environmental Education Center, where school-age children go to learn about the importance of wetlands and the roles hunters and farmers play in the perpetuation of these natural areas.

Sigmond, a native of Modesto, holds a BA in science and biology from California State University Stanislaus and a California teaching credential. Her experience includes nearly 20 years as a chemist in the agricultural industry and the past six years as a scientific aide for the Department of Fish and Game.

Her hire comes at a time of transition for the environmental education center to its new location at Los Banos Wildlife Area, where a developed nature trail and pond area are already in use. By mid-April a 20- by 60-foot classroom will be moved onto the wildlife area for scientific study.

"I led my first group of 61 students and 12 chaperones in late February," Sigmond said. "Even without a classroom they were able to take a nature walk, do some field study at the pond, identify birds and animal tracks, and go

on a scavenger hunt. Being outdoors at the wildlife area made a real impact on the kids and adults."

Sigmond intends to have activities at the environmental center tie into state curriculum standards in biology, science and ecology, among others, so lessons taught outdoors will boost classroom learning in public schools.

Her position is funded jointly by the Grassland Water District and Department of Fish and Game.

Once the classroom building is in place—a concrete pad and utilities are already installed—the Grassland Environmental Center will operate year-around. Only two other educational facilities are operating on state wildlife areas. They include centers at Yolo Wildlife Area near Davis and Gray Lodge Wildlife Area near Gridley.

"This effort in the Grasslands is long overdue," said Veronica Woodruff, office manager at the Grassland Water District. "It is appropriate that the center is located at Los Banos Wildlife Area, the first state wildlife area that was designated in 1929. By educating young people, the center will help us protect

and enhance the 180,000-acre Grassland Ecological Area, the largest historic, contiguous wetland complex that still exists in the Central Valley. Children need to know about this incredible resource and the wildlife values that are found here."

The non-profit center is seeking \$40,000 in donations to cover the final costs of purchasing the building.

Environmental Center Receives Donations

The Grassland Environmental Education Center is gaining the interest of hunter conservationists. Recently the non-profit center, sponsored by the Grassland Conservation and Education Fund, received donations from the Stillbow Club and the Liatnup Club.

Donations are key to the success of the center. To donate or for further information about the Grassland Environmental Education Center, contact Veronica Woodruff at (209) 826-5188 or Candace Sigmond at (209) 804-4772.