

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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Waterfowl Harvest Rated "GREAT" During 2006-2007 Hunting Season

Waterfowl hunters on private duck clubs in the Grasslands experienced their third consecutive season of good hunting, an indication the resource is doing well.

Biologist Richard Wright, who works jointly for the California Waterfowl Association and the Grassland Water District, gave this assessment at the annual Landowners Meeting, held May 19 at the Los Banos Sportsmen's Club.

"Waterfowl numbers were strong on the Pacific Flyway and the juvenile-to-adult ages ratios were good, strong indicators that led to a good harvest," Wright said. "Overall hunters harvested 4.63 birds per day in wetlands north of Highway 152 and 4.39 birds on wetlands south of the highway. These are extremely good numbers and proof the birds were pretty equally divided between the north and the south Grasslands." He noted that the survey doesn't include the East Grasslands.

Wright said his statistics were derived from voluntary harvest statistics provided by 45 private duck clubs in the Grasslands. It was the 10th straight year that at least 35 clubs provided statistics.

"We believe the similar amount of August flooded habitat in the north and south Grasslands allowed birds to establish traditional use in both areas," Wright said. "This led to good distribution and consistent shooting throughout the Grasslands."

Wright also credited what he calls "satellite sanctuaries" on private and public wetlands for spreading the birds on a more even basis throughout the district.

"The hard freeze in January also helped to increase the harvest and daily average," said Wright.

He noted the increase in diving ducks, especially among ring-necked and canvasback, species that continue to show positive upward trends in population.



Highly Concentrated — Approximately 40 percent of green-winged teal that were surveyed in California in January were found in the Grasslands. Photo courtesy of Mike Sorsky, © 2007.

Wright said Grassland waterfowl surveys found excellent numbers of green-winged teal—about 40 percent of all the green-wings that wintered in California—and very high early season counts for pintail. Late in the season, however, pintail and wigeon numbers tailed off.

Top three species of ducks harvested

on private clubs were green-winged teal, northern shoveler and wigeon.

Green-wings made up 48.5 percent of the bag in the north, 47.5 percent in the south. Among the other species, shoveler made up 18.2 percent in the north, 17.6 percent in the south; pintail, 5.5 percent and 5.6 percent; mallard 5.9 percent and 3.2 percent.

Water District Presents a Balanced Budget

By David L. Widell
General Manager

Comments given at the annual Landowners Meeting on May 19, 2007

First the good news: we have a balanced budget. Thanks to your help and support in providing the Grassland Water District a much needed fee increase, we have moved into "modern times" in terms of our ability to manage and protect our water supply, not to mention the significant resources we expend on land use, legal counsel and water quality monitoring.

We could not be doing what we are

doing today without your keen understanding of the unique nature of this water district and the importance of keeping financially solvent.

However, I must be honest and direct about the fact that while we may have brought ourselves "back to the future" when it comes to budget, we can never allow ourselves to fall so far behind that we once again are forced to call upon you for such a drastic increase as was required for the 2005–2006 water year. Our commitment to you is to stay on top of our budgetary

(Continued, page 6)

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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Mammoth Project — California Waterfowl Association's work on the Santa Fe Canal near hollow Tree Duck Club was funded through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

President's 2007 Wetlands Report Cites CWA's Habitat Work in No. San Joaquin Valley

California Waterfowl Association's North San Joaquin Valley Wetland Habitat Project, Phase II of a North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant, has been highlighted in President Bush's 2007 Wetlands Report. The report was unveiled as part of the national Earth Day Celebration, according to biologist Richard Wright, who works jointly with CWA and the Grassland Water District.

Wright said the importance of wetlands stewardship is reflected in the array of public-private partnerships through efforts at the federal level. In April 2004, President Bush announced a new national policy on wetlands, with a goal to restore or create, improve or protect at least 3 million acres between 2004 and 2009. NAWCA grants are a pivotal part of the policy.

"NAWCA grants are awarded to improvement projects that modify a functioning wetlands ecosystem to provide long-term wetland conservation benefits," Wright said. "Many thanks go out to all of the partners involved in the NAWCA grant, which is entering into its second construction season."

Under the grant partners will use their \$1 million NAWCA grant to improve and protect 16,304 acres of

wetlands and associated riparian and upland habitats on private and public lands in three of the Central Valley Joint Venture's focus areas. Private and public partners will restore 507 acres and enhance 14,916 acres more by employing various water control techniques in wetland areas, planting riparian trees and seeding uplands.

Conservation easements will be acquired on 761 acres of habitat and another 120 acres will be purchased outright. California waterfowl association will secure 30-year management agreements with 10 private landowners participating in the project. At least 13 federally and state listed endangered or threatened species also will benefit from partners' efforts.

Wright said project partners are contributing \$2,829,225 in matching funds and \$138,761 in nonmatching funds. Conservation Technical Assistance to help private landowners will be provided through the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

For information about CWA grants contact Wright at (209) 826-5188 or via e-mail at: rich_wright@calwaterfowl.org.

Water Use and Availability in a Dry Year

David Widell, general manager of the Grassland Water District, recently told district landowners the current dry year and a reduced water supply is an "excellent exercise" for district staff and landowners and could provide the political opportunity needed to bring attention to a much larger problem.

Widell said, "We have experienced a series of fairly wet years which have allowed our base supply to go much farther. From a landowner's vantage point you would have no reason to believe that the water you were being delivered was nothing more than our actual supply. However, the fact is that we have been dealing with surplus supplies for a number of years because of abundant rainfall."

This year represents a different situation for the GWD.

"Sooner or later the GWD staff knew it was going to have to deal with dry conditions," Widell said. "Fortunately, this year wasn't so dry that your fall supplies were cut, which could happen in prolonged drought conditions."

This year the GWD has honed its water department's understanding of how far it can actually stretch supplies, and brought greater attention to the need to implement on-club water conservation measures during dry years.

On the political side this dry year also brings attention to what is a more sobering fact. Federal appropriations must keep pace with the rapidly increasing cost of water that the GWD requires for its spring and summer supplies. The GWD could eventually face severe and chronic water shortages caused not by drought, but by budget shortfalls.

In just the last fifteen years, the cost of an acre-foot of water has gone from roughly \$30 an acre-foot, to as much as \$200 today, Widell said.

So what's the solution?

According to Widell, "First, conservation, conservation, conservation. Landowners are going to be hearing much more from us this fall in terms of buttoning up systems and keeping maintenance flows to a minimum. We are hoping this will work on a voluntary basis, but if it doesn't, the GWD will consider priced-based measures to serve as an incentive to further conservation. Second, we must step up our efforts to work with other partners, both environmental and agricultural," he said. "We must definitively and quantifiably make

our case that these supplies have transformed what had been all but completely erased from the Grassland landscape. We will need to forge strong alliances with unlikely bedfellows who share the same concerns that water provided to the Grasslands roughly fifteen years ago is now beginning to retract.

"A strong, focused lobbying effort combined with the assistance of professional water brokers who can help the agencies in identifying new sources of long-term wetland water supplies will be a major focus for the GWD in 2008," Widell continued. "We must also call upon our traditional partners, such as California Waterfowl Association and Ducks Unlimited, to become as engaged in the process." Both CWA and DU have accomplished a wealth of improvements to the habitat in the Grasslands and rely upon an adequate, well-timed water supply to carry out their missions. CWA's historic efforts, beginning with Dan Chapin, helped to secure these supplies, and DU's recent development of their Western Water Program has served the GWD very well.

"We now need renewed initiatives to ensure the slippage in our water supply we are witnessing is immediately stopped," Widell said, "and to regain the ground we have lost."

The GWD will also be tightening up its water accounting procedures to provide a more constant measure of where we are, at any given time, both in terms of water deliveries and budget.

For information on water conservation practices, contact Rob Kocher at the GWD, (209) 826-5188.



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Grassland Stewardship Plan is Underway

The Grassland Water District is working with Ducks Unlimited and Sustain Environmental Consulting to implement the Grassland Stewardship Plan.

The plan is a state grant-funded effort to increase awareness of the Grassland Ecological Area and its unique resources. Inevitably the plan will be the basis of efforts to protect the 180,000-acre Grasslands within one of the fastest growing regions in California.

Camille Remy of Sustain Environmental Consulting complimented the GWD for its role in protecting the Grasslands and acknowledged that additional partners must be brought in to continue the fight against encroachment and to put the Grasslands on regional and state maps.

"We must describe in a tangible way the Grassland boundaries and the importance of maintaining adequate open space surrounding the area," Remy said. "We must create our spheres of influence and a variety of stakeholders to protect this resource."

Further, the GWD is considering the concept of a Grassland Legal Defense Fund. This fund would supplement the resources of the GWD and would work in tandem with district staff and legal counsel to protect the area's critical wetland resources.

In concept, this fund could be particularly helpful to shield those properties which lie on the edge of the Grasslands and are at the greatest risk of future impact.

"Private landowners faced with defending themselves from the urban sprawl that is certain to come could bankrupt their clubs if they go it alone. Likewise, relying solely on the GWD could thin our operation, leaving us with few resources to protect water supplies, not to mention paying staff and keeping the lights on," said Widell.

"We will need the help and support of landowners," Widell said. "We will be engaging landowners about these concepts in the near future."



Well-Deserved Recognition – Don Marciochi, former general manager of the Grassland Water District, who retired recently after a 34-year career, is the 2007 recipient of the J. Martin Winton Conservation Award. Marciochi (above right) accepted the award from Jim Winton, son of the late J. Martin Winton, who was instrumental in getting a water supply for the Grasslands.

Marciochi said he never anticipated receiving such an honor from the Grassland Resource Conservation District. "I was so fortunate over the years to have worked with people such as Martin Winton, Roy Lower and Carter Harrison, true pioneers who were passionate about the Grasslands," Marciochi said. "We've come along way securing a firm supply of well-timed water, fighting encroachment and urban sprawl and protecting the integrity of this magnificent wetland complex."

2006–2007 Waterfowl Harvest Summary for Private Duck Clubs

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
North Grasslands	3.41	4.31	3.74	4.63
South Grasslands	3.41	3.69	3.82	4.39
Range	10.83-6.35	1.46-5.78	1.97-6.03	2.10-6.29

	2005-06	2006-07	Change from 2005-06
G. W. Teal	47.3%	48.5%	+1.2 %
Shoveler	14.2%	18.2%	+4.0%
Pintail	6.4%	5.5%	-0.9%
Mallard	8.1%	5.9%	-2.2%
Cinn. Teal	6.4%	6.1%	+0.1%
Wigeon	7.1%	5.0%	-2.1%
Gadwall	5.7%	5.7%	0.0%
Other	3.4%	3.8%	+0.4%
Geese	0.6%	0.3%	-0.3 %
Ring-necked duck	0.3%	0.3%	0.0 %
Canvasback	0.3%	.05%	+0.2%
Redhead	0.4%	0.2%	- 0.2%

Number of Clubs Reporting:

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
North Grasslands:	24	28	22	22
South Grasslands:	19	26	24	23
	43	54	46	45

Grassland Notes

• **Mosquito control** — Volta Wildlife Area, which traditionally holds spring and summer brood water, and offers early migrating northern pintail in August, is being sprayed for insects with funds through the Mosquito Abatement Act. Biologist Sean Allen said he's received excellent assistance through Merced County's Mosquito Abatement Control to curb the spread of West Nile virus. Information: Sean Allen, (209) 826-0463.

* * *

• **Collaborative efforts** — Grassland Water District staff currently are working on the Merced County 25-year General Plan Update and, specifically, on the Water Committee. Staff is also giving input and participating on the City of Los Banos General Plan Update. Encroachment from urban sprawl is the largest threat to the Grassland Ecological Area, so participation in these county and city efforts is vital to the long-term viability of the unique wetlands complex. Information: Dave Widell, (209) 826-5188.

* * *

• **Funds for easements** — Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, said federal funds for conservation easements have been released from Washington, D.C. Six properties within the Grasslands covering approximately 3,500 acres are being appraised. "It's our top priority to put these lands under easements," Forrest said. "We've also been assured of funding for additional easements under the current administration." Information: Shawn Milar, (209) 826-3508.

* * *

• **Classroom building in place** — A new home for the Grassland Environmental Education Center has been placed at the Los Banos Wildlife Area, adjacent to a wetlands walk complete with interpretive signs. Coordinator Candace Sigmond said installation of cable service for Internet access and electrical power through PG&E will be ready about June 30. Once fully operational the center will run year-round and provide free tours for public- and private-school children. Largest user groups are students and teachers in grades 4–6. Information: Candace Sigmond, (209) 826-0463.

Landowner Lives for Hunting and Photographing Waterfowl

Like many hunters in the Grasslands, Mike Sorsky is part of a family that has owned a duck club for a long time. He lives and breathes duck hunting, and doubles his time afield pursuing another passion, that of a wildlife photographer.

Check out his website at www.lame-duckimages.com and you'll see some of the finest images of ducks, geese, shorebirds and many other species typically found on Central Valley wetlands.



Mike Sorsky

"I hunt between three and four days a week in the South Grasslands," Sorsky said. "We live for the hunt, my son Mark and I. We believe in the tradition very strongly."

His father, the late Dr. Eliot Sorsky, bought the 175-acre South Dos Palos and Company Club—formerly known as the Lame Duck Club—70 years ago. The Sorsky Ditch, a GWD-operated canal, first brought water to the property and neighboring clubs decades ago.

Mike Sorsky got his start at age 7 when he first plied the marsh with a .410 side-by-side. He continues to hunt that learned place at Dos Palos and Company, a three-man club, located at the fork of Wild Duck Road and Mallard Road.

Sorsky, 62, is also a member of the Gables Gun Club. Mark, optometrist from Sanger, belongs to the Coach's Club.

"It's tough to grab a camera when ducks are flying," said Sorsky, who lives in Fresno. "I stay two nights in a row and hunt, and then go back out again with a camera."

He enjoys traveling through national wildlife refuge sanctuaries in search of good subjects, on the water or on the wing. "I do some of my best photography in the refuge closed zones," he said.

He believes the best place to get good wildlife photos is along the six-mile tour route at Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge near Willows.

"You are going to come home with pictures, no matter what," he said. "I

make that long drive to northern California quite often and, at times, I use a special photography blind provided by refuge staff. I go take pictures where the opportunity is pretty good."

Sorsky's photographs are protected by copyright and available for sale. He graciously gave *Grassland Today* permission to use the photographs that appear in this publication.

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May/June 2007



Water District Presents a Balanced Budget...(from page 1)

needs and pursue future fee increases on a more incremental and consistent basis.

I'm not implying the district is discussing any such fee increase at this point, but no organization stands still, at least no organization that sees itself staying in business for the long haul. Clearly, the ultimate decision of our fee structure rests with you, the district landowners, and we must justify our needs when we make our case. Nonetheless, I want to approach any future increase in a much more measured and gradual way. In that regard, I intend to begin to work with the board of directors on a long-term approach to fee increases, which will include ongoing communication with our landowners as to what we are up to, and more importantly, what we will eventually need in order to stay ahead of the curve.

Landowners can be assured that as a first priority we will always seek out

alternative funding sources to offset costs, but fee increases are ultimately inevitable.

Over the years the GWD has filled an important role in not only providing private and public wetlands with water, but also with legal and biological support to contend with the ominous threat of encroachment.

Most of you know if not for the efforts of the Grassland Water District and our partners, the Gadwall and Mud Slough Wildlife Areas would today be another subdivision, and the sleepy settlement of Volta would no longer be so sleepy.

While these represent some of the GWD's historic battles to preserve the integrity of the Grasslands, the barrage of development coming to Merced County is a fight the district cannot win alone, thus the need for expanded partnerships and the development of a Grassland Stewardship Plan.

Highlights of CWA's Grassland Projects

- Between 2001–2009 California Waterfowl Association has 61 wetlands projects that have either been accomplished or proposed within the Grasslands of Merced County.

- Project breakdown includes: 44 federal NAWCA projects, 12 state Wildlife Conservation Board projects and 5 California Duck Stamp projects.

- Total NAWCA and matching funds for projects in the northern San Joaquin Valley is approximately \$3 million.

- Of that total \$661,000 has been used specifically for projects within the Grassland Water District.