

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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USFWS Proposes Liberal Framework

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed continuation of liberal hunting regulations for the upcoming 2007–2008 late waterfowl seasons due to improved habitat conditions and waterfowl population estimates. The maximum duck hunting season lengths will be 60 days in both the Atlantic and Mississippi Flyways, 74 days in the Central Flyway, and 107 days in the Pacific Flyway.

“Based on spring duck numbers, improved breeding habitat conditions and an improved outlook for production in many breeding areas, we propose to give hunters a wide range of hunting opportunities,” said Service Director H. Dale Hall. “We have five species that are at record or near record highs, including canvasbacks, and there are good breeding conditions on the prairies. However, we remain concerned that pintails and scaup have not yet responded to the improved habitat conditions and remain well below long-term averages.

Duck populations rise 14 percent from 2006. Read the complete story on page 5.

“The scaup population has experienced a significant long-term decline and this year’s estimate is the third lowest on record,” said Hall. “The Service is proposing to continue the reduction on the daily bag limits that has been in place the last two years in all flyways. We may need to consider additional restrictions in the future if the trend continues.”

States select their season from within the frameworks or the outer limits of season length, bag limits and season beginning and ending date.

Brief highlights of the proposed frameworks for the Pacific Flyway follow:

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High-Speed Rail Threatens Wetlands

Unreal Photo — The High-Speed Rail Authority is proposing a route for the fast-moving train that would run along the north side of Henry Miller Ave., north of Los Banos, that would negatively impact privately-owned wetlands and the Los Banos Wildlife Area, the state’s first designated wildlife area. The above computer-generated photo, prepared by the High-Speed Rail Authority, shows how the rail line and viaduct would look cutting through wetlands. Check out their website at: www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov/public_notice/default.asp. Then mail comments to: California High-Speed Rail Authority, 925 L Street, Suite 1425, Sacramento, CA 95814.

Fall Flood Up is Underway

GWD Expects to Get All Wetlands Filled By Opener

Privately owned, seasonal wetlands within the Grassland Resource Conservation District will be filled by the opening day of waterfowl hunting season, in spite of the exceptionally dry year.

That’s the positive news coming from Scott Lower, assistant general manager of the GWD, who said, “I don’t anticipate any problems with fall flood up. Most clubs will begin filling on or around September 15th.” The District has also identified the need to have some water out for early arriving pintail. With the cooperation of the Dept. of Fish & Game and the Fish & Wildlife Service, sufficient water will be present on both the North and South

Grasslands for the early arrival of ducks. The District extends their thanks to both agencies for helping to provide some early water.

Volta Wildlife Area began flooding on Aug. 1 to provide habitat for northern pintail, early arrivals that usually start piling into the Grasslands the first week of August. Without special accommodation, pintail would face parched wetlands and no place to land.

The dry year has produced some shortfalls and GWD has not gone unscathed. Loss of portion of the District’s Level 4 water supply has caused the

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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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West Nile Virus Raises Ugly Health Threat

With human cases of West Nile virus up nearly threefold over last year and many other indications of a looming epidemic in the state, the Mosquito and Vector Control Association of California urged Gov. Schwarzenegger to be prepared to devote resources to combat the deadly disease.

So far this year 42 Californians, including two deaths in Kern County and one in San Joaquin County, have become ill from exposure to West Nile virus. The virus has been detected in 38 counties, including Merced—home of the Grassland Ecological Area. Historically the worst months for the virus are August and September when fall flood up of seasonal wetlands is underway.

Allan Inman, director of the Merced County Mosquito Abatement District, said, "All standing water around our homes and duck clubs where mosquitoes might breed should be eliminated. It's critical that everyone, including landowners in the Grassland Water District, report any dead birds they might find."

Inman said a dead magpie found in the McSwain area of Merced County tested positive for West Nile virus following analysis performed at UC Davis Center for Vector-Borne Diseases.

He stressed, "Control efforts can be greatly aided by reporting dead birds as in the past several years, and we should all avoid becoming complacent about this mosquito-borne virus. Early detection and eliminating mosquito breeding areas are keys to preventing the spread of West Nile virus. Persons over the age of 45 years should be especially vigilant to avoid mosquito bites."

The public can report dead birds to the California Department of Health by logging on to http://westnile.ca.gov/report_wnv.php or by calling toll free, (877) 968-2473.

Merced County health officer, Dr. Tim Livermore, said there are three simple ways for people to protect themselves from mosquitoes that might carry WNV:

- DEET — Apply insect repellent containing DEET, picaradin or oil of lemon eucalyptus, according to label instructions. Repellents keep the mosquitoes from biting. DEET can be used safely on infants and children two months of age and older.

- DAWN AND DUSK — Mosquitoes that carry WNV bite in the early morning and evening so it is important to wear

repellent at this time. Make sure doors and windows have tight-fitting screens to keep out mosquitoes. Repair or replace screens with tears or holes.

- DRAIN — Mosquitoes lay their eggs on standing water. Eliminate sources of standing water on your property. If you have a pond use mosquito fish or commercially available products to eliminate mosquito larvae.

The Merced County Mosquito Abatement District once again will spray duck club compounds this year, if requested. The application effectively reduces up to 70 percent of the mosquitoes. To sign up for spraying—the service is free—contact Inman toll free at (800) 622-3242.

No Need for 2007 District Election

Three seats, each with a four-year term, were up for election to the Grassland Water District's board of directors this November. Because incumbents Bob Nardi, Tom Mackey and Doug Federighi were the only ones to file with Merced Co. Elections, the District won't need to go through the election process this time around. The next election, if needed, will take place in two years in November, 2009.

Rules for Cattle Grazing in Merced County

It's a fact: Merced County, including the Grasslands Ecological Area, is a "fence-in" county. This means that the person who is responsible for the cattle is responsible for building and maintaining a fence around the cattle. Merced Co. Code 7.04.090 states: "Any person who owns or is responsible for the care, custody, or control of livestock, must maintain the animals within a lawful fence as outlined in Food and Agriculture Code Sections 17121 and 17152." For the complete code, refer to California Food & Ag Codes 17121-17128 and 17150-17153 online at www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html.

In addition, national wildlife refuge lands, including private wetlands covered under federal easements, are covered by federal regulation that imposes a fine. For information about federal lands contact Kim Forrest, project leader at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Los Banos at (209) 826-3508.

CWA North San Joaquin Valley NAWCA Grant Scores No. 1 Nationally

Biologists from the California Waterfowl Association have done it again, scoring No. 1 nationally for the second time, out-competing other grant proposals to improve wetlands habitat.

CWA's North San Joaquin Valley Phase III grant has officially secured \$1 million funding and work will start in 2008 and 2009 in Merced and Fresno counties. Biologist Rich Wright, who doubles as a biologist for both CWA and the Grassland Water District, confirmed the grant for North American Wetlands Conservation Act funds ranked first across the U.S.

The Phase II grant includes four Grassland Water District projects on the Agatha Canal, Bennett Ditch, Helm Canal and Redfern Ditch. Work will replace large weirs and crossings and also rebuild banks.

Wright said grant monies will also cover two projects on the Los Banos and North Grasslands State Wildlife areas and 13 projects on private lands, including 12 private land projects within the Grassland Water District. The location of the remaining private land project is near the Mendota Wildlife Area.

All totaled the NAWCA grant and its matching funds will allocate \$6,816,800 to purchase 341 acres in fee title and \$296,500 to restore 473 acres.

In addition to the \$1 grant from NAWCA, matching partners will pony up \$2,369,866. San Joaquin River Conservancy will provide \$2 million; Grassland Water District \$103,366 and private landowners \$266,500.

Non-matching partners contributing to the projects include the U.S. Department of Transportation, \$2,600,000 and the state Wildlife Conservation Board, \$2,216,800.

Wright said northern San Joaquin Valley wetlands support upwards of 1.5 million waterfowl and 250,000 shorebirds during the peak migration periods in winter and spring. The largest concentration of these birds reside within the Grassland Ecological Area—a 180,000-acre complex that encompasses approximately 120,000 acres of privately-owned wetlands and three U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service refuges and two State Wildlife areas that combine for approximately 60,000 acres of publicly-owned lands.

“The Grasslands represents the largest contiguous wetlands complex in California,” Wright said.

He said the 22 projects will provide protection, restoration and enhancement results that will “significantly improve and expand” the habitat base within the Grasslands and San Joaquin River Parkway. Work in the ensuing summers will include de-leveling agricultural fields, constructing new levees, installing water control structures improving water delivery systems, developing new water sources, rehabilitating degraded wetlands, planting of riparian trees and seeding of upland areas.

“The NAWCA grant proposal was rated so highly because it continues with a landscape approach to acquisition, restoration and enhancement of wetlands in the North San Joaquin Valley and because it integrates 22 projects encompassing a mosaic of wetland, riparian and upland habitats,” Wright said. “The projects are in a large geographic area that covers two-of-nine focus areas identified by the Central Valley Joint Venture.”

Los Banos Bypass Finally Gets Green Light after 40 Years

Plans to reroute Highway 152 around the City of Los Banos earned their final approval recently when the Federal Highway Administration cleared Caltrans to begin final engineering work and construction of the long-delayed project.

The 10-mile bypass will cross the Central Valley just north of Los Banos along Henry Miller Avenue. The Grassland Water District, state Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, among others, are seeking protections and mitigation for the loss or disturbance to nearby wetlands.

Caltrans estimates the project could break ground by 2012, but that is if local governments can gather \$424 million, the cost of building the bypass—a project some 40 years in the making.

Local officials believe rerouting the highway—which now runs down Pacheco Boulevard and directly through the core of Los Banos—is vital to the city's future. The highway is used by commuters from the San Francisco Bay Area and also serves as a major east-west artery for moving across California.

In order to protect the Grasslands

In addition to private lands and San Joaquin River Conservancy projects, there are specific benefits to the public. Work on the Los Banos and North Grasslands Wildlife area and at Spano River Ranch are open to the public year-around to provide outdoor recreation such as hiking, birding, hunting, fishing and researching.

“These landscape-based improvements will increase wildlife use of these habitats and ultimately lead to improved public opportunities,” Wright said.

For information about the NAWCA grant Phase III call Wright at (209) 826-5188 or online at rich_wright@calwaterfowl.org.

Eagles No Longer Listed

On Aug. 8 the bald eagle officially soared off the list of threatened and endangered species, reported the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. After plummeting to just 400 pairs in the lower 48 states in 1963, the population has rebounded to more than 10,000 pairs today. Information: www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/BaldEagle.htm.

from growth impacts, the City of Los Banos has proposed that the Bypass route be the City's urban limit boundary.

DU Supports Ed Center

Chris Hildebrandt, regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited, said his organization has provided many services and money to get the new Grassland Environmental Education Center up and running by September.

In addition to \$9,250, DU installed Americans With Disabilities Act-approved ramps into the classroom/laboratory, made electrical connections to existing service poles and purchased two new signs. Ducks Unlimited received much needed grant funds from the California Wildlife Conservation Board to fund most of the GEECe relocation and enhancement.

The new 20- by 60-foot building will provide a classroom/laboratory atmosphere to aid in the wetlands conservation learning process and compliment the in-the-field activities in the interpretive marsh.

State's Breeding Ducks Down Slightly This Year

Breeding duck numbers in California dropped about 3 percent this spring and summer, according to Dan Yparraguirre, waterfowl coordinator for the Department of Fish and Game.

"This year's count was not statistically significant," Yparraguirre said. "There's really no change and our agency is going to recommend the same seasons and bags. There shouldn't be anything different from 2006-2007."

He said mallards are four percent above their long-term average. The 2006 surveys counted approximately 53,000 mallards in the Grasslands of Merced County. In 2007 surveyors found about 47,000 mallards in the Grasslands, a drop of 11 percent.

"Breeding mallards in the Grasslands dropped more than the state as a total," Yparraguirre said. "The only area to increase was the Northeast zone, where breeding mallards increased this year to 121,000, up from the previous year's count of 104,000."

He cited a very dry spring for the

slight dip in breeding birds. Mallards responded to conditions in the Northeast mainly because they had some water up there.

"We gave California Waterfowl Association banding crews a quota of 50 mallards in the Mendota Wildlife Area," he said. "I don't think they'll make it this year. I've got the same sense in the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex, where broods are way off from last year. With such dry conditions the natural habitat just couldn't be maintained."

Yparraguirre said Grasslands also produced a wider variety of ducks than in most parts of the state, including broods of gadwall, shoveler, cinnamon teal, wood duck and even the occasional northern pintail.

California began studying breeding ducks in 1948, pre-dating federal surveys undertaken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that began in 1955. The only state that has been studying waterfowl longer than California is North Dakota.

Noteworthy "Sightings" in San Joaquin Valley

Ryan DiGaudio of Point Reyes Bird Observatory has listed several noteworthy sightings from the field this summer in the San Joaquin Valley and Tulare Basin.

Among California bird species of special concern, he noted:

- A lone fulvous whistling duck in Tulare County at White Ranch on Deer Creek Pond.

- Least bitterns nested successfully at one of the Exeter Duck Club's brood ponds in Merced County where three partially-downy fledglings were observed huddled together while an adult was calling from nearby cattails. A least bittern was also heard calling at one of the Webfoot brood ponds.

- Nine snow plovers were seen in a drying pond at B&S Cattle in Merced County. Of the nine birds there were at least two pairs defending territories. Later researchers discovered a depredated plover nest, with a pecked open plover egg next to a nest scrape. Two lone males were foraging in the pond but no females were seen.

- A tri-colored blackbird nesting colony was active at the ECLA brood ponds in Kern County. The majority of

the colony appeared to be nesting in the wheat field adjacent to the ponds. Researchers spotted something they'd never seen before—more than 100 of the tricolors were aerial foraging over the pond water, like swallows, probably feeding on a large aquatic insect emergence.

- Two redhead duck broods were seen at White Ranch in Tulare County.

Other sightings:

- Substantial numbers of green-winged and blue-winged teal, which typically nest further north, appear to be hanging around many of the San Joaquin Valley and Tulare Basin sites.

- Lesser nighthawks have been roosting at many of the gravel-covered grounds of duck club compounds in the Grassland Water District. Coast Cattle, in particular, has had a lot of nighthawk activity, some exhibiting courtship behavior.

- Four solitary sandpipers were observed, an uncommon shorebird seen only in migration. Three were spotted in Tulare Basin in Kern County, the other at the Faith Ranch in Stanislaus County.

For information contact DiGaudio at the PRBO, (415) 868-0655, ext. 308; e-mail to: rdigaudio@prbo.org.

Grassland Notes

• Education Center Gets Boost

— The highly-respected Grassland Environmental Education Center, expected to reopen in September with a new classroom/laboratory at Los Banos Wildlife Area, has received a major grant from an unlikely source. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced it will give a \$15,000 grant for the education center, a welcome boost that will help pay for electrical hookups. "I am very pleased the service has made funds available to an outside agency," said Kim Forrest, project leader of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "It's highly unusual to be helping fund a non-profit agency located on state land. We're glad to be a partner in this effort."

* * *

• **Grassland Today is Online** — The current issue of *Grassland Today*, as well as issues as far back as July/August 2004 can be found online at <http://www.grasslandwetlands.org>. Just click on "Newsletter."

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• Landowner Contact Information

— Landowners are reminded to keep the Grassland Water District office apprised of any changes in membership phone numbers and addresses as well as those for the club's main contact person. Updated information can be emailed to Veronica Woodruff at veronica@grasslandwetlands.org or mailed to her at: GWD, 22759 S. Mercey Springs Road, Los Banos, CA 93635.

* * *

• **Marathon Migration** — In March a satellite-marked gadwall (such as the one pictured below) flew about 1,300 miles in less than three days, going from the southern U.S. to Devils Lake in North Dakota according to Ducks Unlimited scientists. Information: www.ducks.org/gadwallstudy.



© Mike Khansa, courtesy of Ducks Unlimited

Duck Populations Increase 14 Percent from 2006 – 24 Percent Above Long-Term

Results from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Canadian Wildlife Service's Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey show a total duck population estimate of more than 41 million birds in the traditional survey area. This represents a 14 percent increase from 2006 and is 24 percent above the 1955–2006 average.

“There's a lot of good news in the survey this year for the total duck and waterfowl breeding habitat,” said H. Dale Hall, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We have five species that are at record or near record highs, including canvasbacks, and there are good breeding conditions on the prairies. However, we remain concerned that pintails and scaup are well below long-term averages.”

The Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey, the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind in the world, samples 1.3 million square miles across the north-central United States, south-central and Canada, and Alaska. The survey estimates the number of ducks in the continent's most important nesting grounds.

Annual survey results help guide the Service in managing waterfowl conservation programs under authority of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Service works in partnership with State representatives from four Flyway Councils—the Atlantic, Mississippi, Central and Pacific—to establish regulatory frameworks for waterfowl hunting season lengths, dates and bag limits.

Overall, habitat conditions for breeding waterfowl in 2007 were similar or slightly improved compared to conditions in 2006. The total pond estimate (Prairie Canada and United States combined) was 7.0 million ponds, 15 percent greater than last year's estimate of 6.1 million ponds and 44 percent higher than the long-term average of 4.9 million ponds. For the third year in a row, habitat conditions were good or excellent in the northern grasslands and parklands of southern Saskatchewan and southern Manitoba. Conditions in the Eastern Dakotas, which experienced drought in 2006, were improved by abundant fall and winter precipitation, especially in eastern South Dakota.

Highlights from the survey in the north-central United States, south-cen-

tral and northern Canada, and Alaska include:

- The estimated number of 8.0 million mallards is 10 percent greater than last year's estimate of 7.3 million birds and 7 percent above the long-term average.

- The estimated number of 6.7 million blue-winged teal is 14 percent greater than last year's estimate and 48 percent above the long-term average. This year is the third highest estimate on record.

- The estimated number of 2.9 million green-winged teal is similar to last year and 55 percent above the long-term average.

- The estimated number of 3.4 million gadwall is 19 percent greater than last year and 96 percent above the long-term average, and the second highest estimate on record for the traditional survey area.

- The estimated number of 1.0 million redheads is similar to last year and 60 percent above the long-term average. This is a record high for the traditional survey area.

- The estimated number of 865,000 canvasbacks is similar to last year and 53 percent above the long-term average. This is a record high for the traditional survey area.

- The estimated number of northern shovelers at 4.6 million birds is 24 percent above last year and 106 percent above the long-term average. This is a record high for the traditional survey area.

- The estimated number of American wigeon at 2.8 million birds is 29 percent greater than last year and similar to the long term average for this species.

- The estimated number of scaup (lesser and greater combined) at 3.5 million birds is similar to last year and 33 percent below the long-term average. This is the third lowest scaup estimate on record for the traditional survey area. The 2007 estimate for scaup was greater than in 2006; however, this increase was not statistically significant.

- The abundance of northern pintails at 3.3 million birds is similar to last year and 19 percent below the 1955–2005 average.

The entire 2007 Trends in Breeding Duck Populations Report is available on the Service's Web site at <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/>.



Green-winged teal up 55 percent from long-term average. Photo © 2007 Mike Sorsky

[fws.gov/migratorybirds/](http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/). The 2007 Waterfowl Status Report will be available at the same site in late July. This report will include information from State and Provincial surveys as well as goose and swan information. Interviews with the pilot/biologists and video of the conditions can be seen at <http://www.fws.gov/video/wmv/statusprelim2007a.wmv>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 97-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges and thousands of small wetlands.

USFWS Proposes Liberal Framework... (from page 1)

Ducks: Under the proposal, California is allowed a 107-day season between September 22, 2007, and January 27, 2008. The proposed daily bag limit is seven ducks, including no more than two mallard hens, two redheads, three scaup, one pintail and two canvasbacks.

Geese: 100-day seasons are proposed for California, with outside dates between September 22, 2007, and March 10, 2008. Proposed basic daily bag limits are four light geese and four dark geese. For brant, the proposed season length is 30 days in California, with a two-bird daily limit.

The proposed waterfowl frameworks will appear in a mid-August edition of the Federal Register for public comment and on <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/fedreg/MGBHR.HTML>.

Return Service Requested

July/August 2007



School Children Write Their Thoughts About Wetlands

In January 2006, near the end of the waterfowl hunting season, fourth and fifth grade students at Charleston Elementary were nearing the end of their own assignment. They compiled a booklet titled, "Wide World of Wetlands."

The impressionable students had toured the Grassland Environmental Education Center, walked along a wetland, read the interpretive signs that explained their value and then were asked to write about the importance of maintaining the unique Grassland Ecological Area—180,000 acres maintained by governmental and private ownership.

Here's a sample of what the students had to say:

Adrian, Steven and Dominique wrote, "There are many types of wetlands. A wetland is land that is under water for part of the year. Some wetlands are very large, but others are as small as a backyard. One of the main wetlands in the Los Banos area is the freshwater marsh. There have been a lot of wetlands disappearing in the Central Valley and California.

"For example there were four million acres of wetlands in the Central Valley in the early 1900s and now there are only 40,000 acres left. The Grassland Ecological Area near Los Banos is the largest contiguous freshwater wetland left in California and is about 180,000

acres. We need to do what we can to conserve them."

Phillip, Robert and Serena write, "Wetlands help purify water and prevent flooding. They give habitat to animals, and provide food, groundwater and fuel. Wetlands help make water pure and the soil and plants in wetlands can remove dangerous pollution from the water.

"In the Grassland Ecological Area the birds that spend the winter here have flown all the way from Alaska and Canada on the Pacific Flyway. Sixty percent of the flyway waterfowl that spend time in California spend it in the Central Valley. Without wetlands a lot of animals would disappear."

Jessica, Emily and Laura wrote: "Did you know that we have lost about 90 percent of our wetlands in California, about 4,546,000 acres since the 1780s? WE need to work to conserve or protect the wetlands we have left.

"There are a lot of people helping the wetlands today. For example our local Grassland Ecological Area is being protected by hunters and private and public landowners. They work together to keep water in the wetlands and to manage them.

"There is a lot you can do to conserve the wetlands. Learn all about the wetlands near you and tell an adult about what you know. Enjoy the

wetlands. There are a lot of fun things to do at a wetland. You can go bird watching, backpacking, hunting and hiking and begin to appreciate how important wetlands really are."

To learn more about the Charleston School writing project and the curriculum taught at the Grassland Environmental Education Center, contact coordinator Candace Sigmund at (209) 704-4772.

GWD Expects to Fill All Wetlands in Fall...(from page 1)

District to become creative with the use of its water supply. Because of this shortage, the District will apply some strong water conservation practices after all the clubs have been filled. Late-season flow-through waters will be closely monitored and clubs will be asked to make sure that their systems are water-tight. With the cooperation of the clubs, there should be enough water to make it through the season.

Most clubs to start receiving water September 15.

For information about fall flood up or other water-related questions contact Lower at the GWD office at (209) 826-5188 or on his cellular at (209) 704-5187.