

GRASSLAND TODAY

The Grassland Wetlands Newsletter

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www.grasslandwetlands.org

September/October 2007

District Officials Use Water Conservation Practices to Insure Wetland Viability

Grassland Water District has been turning to water conservation practices to insure that clubs will weather the dry year with a healthy population of waterfowl.

According to Scott Lower, assistant general manager for the GWD, "The District has been concerned with water conservation throughout this entire year." Conservation began with assigning allocations to spring and summer water users which allowed those clubs to produce excellent habitat overall yet still preserving an adequate fall water supply. The District was able to combine available drain waters with supply waters to provide needed habitat for early arriving pintail in the month of August. Fall water delivery was delayed two weeks to avoid deliveries during extreme heat conditions. This two-week delay resulted in 88% less water used in the month of August from the previous year. "Water conservation should not stop just because we made it to fall," Lower stated. "We need to be diligent about the water we have if we want to insure that we get through the entire season."

Fall conservation is now on the way. The District is working at getting clubs filled at a rapid pace where possible. This will help avoid those last minute rushes to get clubs filled prior to duck season. "It can take up to three days to slow down water that is designated for a club," Lower explained, "That is why it is so important for clubs to communicate with their canal tender. If we have sufficient notice, we can slow down or divert waters to other beneficial uses and avoid potential losses."

Along with encouraging the clubs to employ best management practices within their clubs, the District is exploring the idea of stopping water flows in late November to conserve water for the remainder of the season. "This means that clubs will have to tighten up during this period and become conservation minded," Lower stated. "There is a strong probability that the District will take this type of action and shut down

for two weeks. We will notify clubs in advance before we proceed with any shut down." The District would re-start deliveries again in December so clubs should not worry about going dry. Lower also noted that closing down the system for two weeks is something the District needs to take a look at so it can evaluate

the overall potential water savings. "It will provide us with an immediate water savings for this year and give us valuable information for use in future years should this drought continue."

To learn more about the GWD's water conservation plan, contact Scott Lower at (209) 826-5188.



Gadwall on the rise — Waterfowl populations are expected to be 14 percent above last year along the Pacific Flyway with green-winged teal, shoveler, gadwall and wigeon numbers at or above long-term goals. Gadwall photo © 2007 by Mike Sorsky.

Poor Hatch for Grassland Mallards

California Waterfowl Association researchers banded far fewer hatch-year mallards this summer in the Grasslands than they normally would during a "normal" year—down from 950 birds in 2006 to just 189 this year.

Dan Loughman, evaluation supervisor for CWA, said banding ducks helps to determine response to various habitat management strategies and water conditions, especially in the spring of each year.

"Hatch-year mallards were way down in 2007," Loughman said. "Available water in the form of permanent wetlands was low. The spring was awfully dry and there were fewer spring and summer irrigations. It turned out to be an extremely poor production year in the Grasslands."

He said CWA crews banded only 450 mallards this spring in the Grasslands, down from 1,260 mallards last year. Fewer than half were hatch-year birds.

"In a typical year we strive for 1,000 mallards to be banded in the Grasslands," Loughman said. "In banner years we will band upwards of 1,500 birds and of that number, 70 percent would be hatch-year birds."

His crews had increased luck trapping and banding birds in late July and August, but most of those birds were molting adults, not hatch-year ducks.

Loughman said banding crews were still at work from the last week of August through September, trying to catch and band newly-arriving pintail. Data from that research will be available in the duck banding annual report, due later in October.

For information about duck banding results and data gleaned from this year's efforts, contact Loughman at his field office in Gridley at (530) 846-3569.

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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Curlwews Counted Throughout Interior Valleys

Between September 13–16, 2007 approximately 100 volunteers surveyed 80 areas in nearly 20 counties throughout California's Central Valley, Imperial Valley and Carrizo Plain, to document use of valley agricultural habitats by the migratory shorebird, the long-billed curlew. Ornithologists from PRBO Conservation Science, Audubon California, and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County teamed up to coordinate this interior valley survey.

With vast expanses of dry and irrigated pastures, alfalfa fields, and post-harvest rice fields, this region is one of the most important in the world for long-billed curlews during migration and winter. The purpose of this survey is to estimate the total number of wintering curlews in the interior valleys of California, to identify hot spots of occurrence, and learn more about which types of croplands they prefer.

Helping answer how long-billed curlews use the Central Valley for migration and wintering habitat is critical to finding ways to protect and enhance agricultural fields and other important habitats for curlews in the Valley. Under the US Shorebird Conservation Plan (see <http://www.fws.gov/shorebirdplan/>), they are categorized as a highly imperiled species, mainly due to population declines, low population size, and threats to their non-breeding and breeding grounds.

Survey efforts in the winter of 2006–2007 coordinated by PRBO Conservation Science and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County counted a minimum of 16,000 curlews using the interior of California. Numbers on the September 2007 survey could top this figure. So far, three parties found a total of 5,600 curlews alone. We expect to know the total number detected by early October.

As its name implies, the long-billed curlew stands out for its long, down-curved bill and its large size. In fact this is the largest shorebird in North America. The largest females (males are smaller) can have bills exceeding seven inches and body masses over 900 grams (almost 2 pounds). During the summer, this species breeds in open grasslands, including some agricultural fields (especially in the Great Basin) from central Oregon and northeastern California east to the mid-western states as well as in the grassland regions of southern British Columbia,



Curlews scrutinized — Surveyors could find more than 16,000 long-billed curlews by the time their field counts are completed in October. The Grasslands provide extremely important habitat to curlews, one of the most prominent shorebirds in the Central Valley. Photo by Stuart MacKay.

Alberta and Saskatchewan. Of all the species in the genus *Numenius*, this shorebird has one of the shortest migrations, mainly migrating west and south to wintering areas including interior and coastal regions of California, Texas, and Mexico.

This survey, the first of its kind, is very important for determining which habitats are important to long-billed curlews in California. The vast expanses of dry and irrigated pastures, alfalfa fields, and post-harvest rice fields provide important habitat for this unique shorebird species in California.

PRBO Conservation Science is a non-profit conservation and education organization dedicated to advancing conservation through birds and ecosystem research.

To view the latest satellite pictures of the migration patterns of long-billed curlews from Oregon and Nevada to CA, visit: <http://data.prbo.org/cadc/shorebird/lbcu.php> or visit PRBO on the web at www.prbo.org.

Audubon California, formed in 1997, works to conserve and restore California's natural ecosystems. Audubon California focuses on three key strategies to accomplish their work: direct conservation, policy & advocacy, and education & outreach. (<http://ca.audubon.org>)

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County's mission is to inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds. They seek to understand the relationship between humans and natural systems. Their goal is to inspire the widest possible audience to enjoy, value and become stewards of the living Earth. <http://www.nhm.org/>

Grassland Neighbors Working Hard To Develop Drainage Solutions

Long before waste water held in evaporation ponds at Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge exposed wildlife and plants to hazardous levels of selenium and bioaccumulation of a variety of toxins, more than 100,000 acres of agricultural lands drained through the Grassland Wetlands. In fact, in order to maintain wetlands, the Grassland Water District actually contracted for the agricultural drain water.

Times have certainly changed. Following the Kesterson disaster in 1984, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined the Grasslands could no longer receive any water with 2 parts per billion selenium in its system because of the concern for wildlife. A new source of well-timed, good-quality water had to be secured.

That new source came about with passage of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act which, for the first time, guaranteed the Grasslands a firm water supply.

And, what about the neighboring Panoche and Pacheco Water and Drainage Districts, Firebaugh Canal Water District, Charleston Drainage District, and the Camp 13 Drainers—draining entities that represent approximately 50,000 acres of agricultural land located south of the Grasslands in Merced and Fresno counties? As historical drainers, what has happened to them over the years?

Dennis Falaschi serves as general manager of the districts. He said, “We’ve switched to drip irrigation, a more efficient type of irrigation that limits the amount of drainage.”

As a point of fact, his districts have converted to almost 70 percent drip irrigation to maintain crops such as almond trees, vineyards, tomatoes and melons of all sorts. “We’re the melon growing capital of the world,” Falaschi said.

“As historical drainers we never drained to Kesterson Reservoir,” Falaschi explained. “Our drainage used to pass through the Grassland Wetlands to the San Joaquin River. But once Grasslands began to receive water through the CVPIA, our drainage would have contaminated their new source of fresh water.”

Falaschi said, “We knew we had to bypass the Grasslands and refuges to stay in business. Obviously we couldn’t afford to build an enclosed facility to the



Green, green grass — Jose tall wheatgrass thrives on drain water and helps to improve water quality in the San Joaquin River.

river—a stretch of 35 miles. We had to find an alternative.”

The solution was to build a bypass facility—about two miles in length—that would discharge into the existing San Luis Drain that would carry the water to Mud Slough and the San Joaquin River. This system would be called the Grassland Bypass.

“What we discharge is shallow ground water that is collected by a tile system and gravity flowed out of the districts,” Falaschi said. “This water is high in salts, boron and selenium.”

After many trips to Washington, D.C., Falaschi got support from politicians, the USFWS, Department of Fish and Game and the Grassland Water District to obtain a use permit to use portions of the San Luis Drain. The plan would allow Panoche and Pacheco Water and Drainage Districts, Firebaugh Canal Water District, Charleston Drainage District and the Camp 13 Drainers to get rid of their contaminated water and not threaten wetlands and wildlife.

Part of the agreement called for drastic reductions to selenium loads that would be discharged to the San Joaquin River. If the districts didn’t meet reduction targets, they would be heavily fined.

Thanks to converting to drip irrigation, among many other things, the water districts have compiled an excellent record of reducing selenium.

“Since 1999 we’ve been under the targets for reducing selenium discharges every month, every year,” Falaschi said.

“After 5 years the permit has been renewed for another 10 years.”

To further limit contaminated discharges Falaschi’s districts, which are included in the Grassland Basin Drainers, have come up with a Regional Drainage Plan that has numerous components—source control using pipelining, drip irrigation, reusing and re-circulating water, and a variety of other techniques. However, there are still challenges.

“We don’t have cost-effective water treatment yet, but feel we’ll have a solution through our drainage plan that will deal with any waste,” Falaschi said. “I invite anyone interested to come out and see what we are doing. Our actions have been such a huge success that others are copying our drainage plan, except some want to use evaporation ponds. We don’t use evaporation ponds.”

Falaschi said his districts have already spent \$64 million to implement the plan and intend to spend another \$30 million over the next four years. However, depending on the cost of treating water, the districts will still be short an estimated \$80 million more to fulfill its plan.

“Grassland Water District has been a fine cooperator and beneficiary of our regional drainage plan,” Falaschi said.

For information about the Regional Drainage Plan contact consulting engineer Joe McGahan at Summers Engineering at imcgahan@summerseng.com. Falaschi may be reached at (209) 364-6136.

Grassland Wetlands of Merced County 2007–2008 Waterfowl Hunting Regulations

Highlights:

- 100-day straight season for ducks and geese
- Canvasback limit increased to 2 birds
- Electronic- and mechanically-operated spinning wing decoys may be used starting Dec. 1
- Goose limit expanded to six birds
- Two special “After Season” Youth Hunts for boys and girls 15 years and under
- Up to 6 small Canada geese (Aleutian and cackler) allowed this year

Regulations for “Balance of State Zone”

Season Dates: Sat., Oct. 20, 2007 through Sun., Jan. 27, 2008

Shooting Hours: One-half hour before sunrise to sunset

Daily Bag Limits:

- **7 ducks.** The bag may include not more than 2 hen mallard, 1 pintail, 2 redhead, 2 canvasback or 3 scaup. Possession limit is double the daily bag.
- **6 geese.** The bag may include not more than 4 white geese (snow and Ross’); 4 white-fronted geese; 4 large Canada geese. Possession limit is double the daily bag.

Special “After Season” Youth Hunts are Feb. 2–3, 2008

Waterfowl Hunting Resources:

California Department of Fish and Game,
Los Banos Wildlife Area (209) 826-0463

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service,
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, (209) 826-3508

Grassland Water District, (209) 826-5188; www.grasslandwetlands.org

CalTip Poaching Hotline: toll-free (888) 334-2258
www.dfg.ca.gov/enforcement/caltip.html

2007–2008 Waterfowl Hunting Season Starting and Stopping Times Los Banos, California

Data provided by the U.S. Naval Observatory

Date	One-Half Hour Before Sunrise	Sunset
Sat., Oct. 20	6:46 a.m.	6:22 p.m.
Sun., Oct. 21	6:47 a.m.	6:19 p.m.
Wed., Oct. 24	6:48 a.m.	6:15 p.m.
Sat., Oct. 27	6:52 a.m.	6:12 p.m.
*Sun., Oct. 28	5:53 a.m.	5:10 p.m.
Wed., Oct. 31	5:56 a.m.	5:07 p.m.
Sat., Nov. 3	5:59 a.m.	5:04 p.m.
Sun., Nov. 4	6:00 a.m.	5:03 p.m.
Wed., Nov. 7	6:04 a.m.	5:00 p.m.
Sat., Nov. 10	6:07 a.m.	4:58 p.m.
Sun., Nov. 11	6:08 a.m.	4:57 p.m.
Wed., Nov. 14	6:11 a.m.	4:54 p.m.
Sat., Nov. 17	6:14 a.m.	4:52 p.m.
Sun., Nov. 18	6:15 a.m.	4:52 p.m.
Wed., Nov. 21	6:18 a.m.	4:50 p.m.
Sat., Nov. 24	6:21 a.m.	4:49 p.m.
Sun., Nov. 25	6:22 a.m.	4:48 p.m.
Wed., Nov. 28	6:25 a.m.	4:47 p.m.
**Sat., Dec. 1	6:28 a.m.	4:47 p.m.
Sun., Dec. 2	6:29 a.m.	4:46 p.m.
Wed., Dec. 5	6:32 a.m.	4:46 p.m.
Sat., Dec. 8	6:34 a.m.	4:46 p.m.
Sun., Dec. 9	6:35 a.m.	4:46 p.m.
Wed., Dec. 12	6:37 a.m.	4:47 p.m.
Sat., Dec. 15	6:39 a.m.	4:48 p.m.
Sun., Dec. 16	6:40 a.m.	4:48 p.m.
Wed., Dec. 19	6:42 a.m.	4:49 p.m.
Sat., Dec. 22	6:44 a.m.	4:50 p.m.
Sun., Dec. 23	6:44 a.m.	4:51 p.m.
Wed., Dec. 26	6:45 a.m.	4:53 p.m.
Sat., Dec. 29	6:46 a.m.	4:55 p.m.
Sun., Dec. 30	6:46 a.m.	4:56 p.m.
Wed., Jan. 2	6:47 a.m.	4:58 p.m.
Sat., Jan. 5	6:47 a.m.	5:00 p.m.
Sun. Jan. 6	6:47 a.m.	5:01 p.m.
Wed., Jan. 9	6:47 a.m.	5:04 p.m.
Sat., Jan. 12	6:47 a.m.	5:07 p.m.
Sun., Jan. 13	6:47 a.m.	5:08 p.m.
Wed., Jan. 16	6:46 a.m.	5:11 p.m.
Sat., Jan. 19	6:45 a.m.	5:14 p.m.
Sun., Jan. 20	6:44 a.m.	5:15 p.m.
Wed., Jan. 23	6:43 a.m.	5:18 p.m.
Sat., Jan. 26	6:41 a.m.	5:21 p.m.
***Sun., Jan 27	6:40 a.m.	5:23 p.m.
****Sat., Feb. 2	6:36 a.m.	5:29 p.m.
****Sun., Feb. 3	6:35 a.m.	5:30 p.m.

* Pacific Standard Time Begins

** Electronic Spinning Winged Decoys May be Used

*** Regular Waterfowl Hunting Season Ends

**** Special "After Season" Youth-only Waterfowl Hunt

Return Service Requested

September/October 2007



High-Speed Rail Alternative Route Threatens Grassland Wetlands

While completion of the proposed 700-mile high-speed rail system that would connect the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles is still years away, there is still contentious political debate about what route the train should travel.

The issue is straightforward: where to lay tracks that will connect the Bay to the Central Valley.

Will the high-speed bullet train go over the Pacheco Pass and through Los Banos—and right through the Grassland Wetlands—or over the Altamont Pass through Modesto?

Either alternative would cost about the same, said the California High-Speed Rail Authority, and each plan includes a whistle stop in Merced.

“The Pacheco Pass route would threaten the Grasslands Ecological Area, no ifs, ands or buts about it,” said Dave Widell, general manager of the Grassland Water District. “Running such a line would be deleterious to wintering water-bird habitat (60 percent of the Pacific Flyways waterfowl use the Grasslands during their annual migration), as well as to endangered and threatened species. In addition, such a rail line would further fragment our wetlands—the largest, contiguous wetland complex that still remains in California—and take away from the tremendous investment of public taxpayer dollars already spent to preserve and protect it.”

Widell added that the Rail Authority’s complete disregard of GWD, DFG and FWS comments related to biological impacts makes their EIR “legal swiss cheese. What is truly egregious is the Pacheco route has nothing to do with cost-effectiveness or ridership, yet everything to do with land speculation by out-of-town developers who hope to someday turn the rail into a Central Valley/Bay Area commuter train. When that happens, you can essentially assume that Santa Nella and Los Banos will eventually merge into a mega-suburb,” he added.

Recently the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council, which includes representatives from across the Valley, endorsed the Altamont route. That path was preferred because it will serve more San Joaquin Valley population centers, including Modesto and Stockton—major hubs that want to be served by high-speed rail.

That endorsement pleases North Bay communities and is supported by San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom, but political leaders in San Jose argue for the Pacheco route, because it would send all trains through their city.

Environmentalists believe the Pacheco route would lead to further development in the Los Banos Area, while the Altamont route would reduce pollution created by commuters who travel from the Valley to the Bay Area by cars.

Following a series of eight public

meetings to gather input the rail authority will choose the final route sometime in October or November 2007. In addition to making comments at the meetings the public can submit comments to the rail authority’s web site: www.cahighspeed-rail.ca.gov/public_notice/default.asp.

“I encourage all Grassland Water District landowners to join managers of state wildlife areas and national wildlife refuges to submit comments and to support the Altamont route,” Widell said.

The rail authority said it will cost an estimated \$37 billion to fund the high-speed trains. A \$10 billion bond measure to pay for the initial phase of the project will likely appear on the November 2008 ballot.

Contact Dan Leavitt (Deputy Director), dleavitt@hsr.ca.gov; Carrie Pourvahidi (Deputy Director), Cpourvahidi@hsr.ca.gov. California High-Speed Rail Authority, 925 L St., Ste. 1425, Sacramento, CA 95814, (916) 324-1541.

Allan Inman of the Merced County Mosquito Abatement District is offering help and advice to duck clubs about the spread of West Nile Virus. His agency is offering to spray compounds to reduce mosquito populations that transmit West Nile by up to 70 percent. There is no charge for the service. Call (209) 722-1527. His office opens at 6:30 a.m. weekdays.



Los Banos California Chapter Ducks Unlimited 37th Annual Fundraising Dinner

Join us on Friday, December 7, 2007

LB Fairgrounds, O'Banion Building
4th and F Streets • Los Banos, CA

Doors open at 6:00 • Cocktails at 6:00
Dinner at 7:30 • Auction at 8:30

Ticket Prices

\$65 Individual • \$95 Couple • \$45 Greenwing
\$325 Sponsor • \$600 Sponsor Couple • \$1200 Corporate Table

Tickets - Advance Sale

Your ticket includes a membership, dinner and the opportunity to participate in the auction, silent auction and numerous drawings.

Early Bird drawing will be for a Franchi 912 3 1/2" Autoloading Max-4 Shotgun!

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Early Bird Date

November 23rd, 2007 – Call for more information:

MAKE A *Real* DIFFERENCE IN CONSERVATION—
Join our Leadership Team!

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Call 1-800-45-DUCKS or go to www.ducks.org and click on "Volunteer."

