

RECYCLED WATER TO PROVIDE A BOOST FOR SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WATERBIRDS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 6, 2016

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New Water Recycling Project to Supply #CAWater to South of Delta Wildlife Areas

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – In a move that will provide a boost to depleted habitat areas in the driest part of the Central Valley, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) today announced a landmark agreement with the North Valley Regional Recycled Water Program. The water recycling project will supply 6,000 acre-feet of water per year to habitat in San Joaquin Valley refuges and wildlife areas.

When completed, as early as 2018, the project will provide highly treated water to south of Delta wetland habitat at places including the Grasslands Wildlife Area, the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, the Los Banos Wildlife Area, and other important wildlife habitat. The “new” water will benefit a wide variety of ducks, geese, shorebirds and songbirds.

“This is the largest new block of water developed for San Joaquin Valley wetlands in a quarter century,” said Audubon California Working Lands Director Meghan Hertel. “The drought has shown how vulnerable these wetlands are, as well as the wildlife that depends on them. This project shows how cooperation can provide effective solutions.”

The project will move highly treated water from Modesto and Turlock through a new pipeline to the Delta Mendota Canal. The canal will then be used to distribute water to wetlands. San Joaquin Valley farms will also receive 24,000 acre-feet of the recycled water.

“This project is the right response to California’s drought, benefitting both the environment and farms,” said **Kim Delfino**, California program director for Defenders of Wildlife. “Recycled water is one of our best sources of new water.”

“Wetlands in California have a low priority for water supply in times of shortage,” said Jeffrey Volberg, Director of Water Law & Policy for California Waterfowl Association. “This new supply of water will provide a secure water supply that will provide nutrition and habitat for migratory waterfowl, as well as breeding habitat for resident birds, such as mallards. This recycling project uses water efficiently in a way that benefits the public and wildlife alike.”

Background: Central Valley wetlands experience drought conditions in all but the wettest of years. Without water deliveries, these wetlands aren’t wet, and wildlife suffers. In the last two drought years, California’s breeding mallard population has fallen 42 percent.

Central Valley wetlands are of hemispheric importance, providing the most important stopping point on the Pacific Flyway for five million migratory waterfowl, which makes up 60 percent of the Pacific Flyway waterfowl population and 20 percent of the continental population. These wetlands also provide essential habitat for hundreds of other species, including resident waterfowl, such as mallards, other waterbirds, such as tricolored blackbirds, glossy ibis and Sandhill cranes, as well as other wildlife.

Before statehood in 1850, Central Valley wetlands were flooded naturally by winter rains and spring snowmelt. Today, 95 percent of those wetlands have been destroyed or modified. Remaining wetlands rely on water deliveries, particularly from the federal [Central Valley Project](#).

In 1992, in recognition of the biological importance of wetlands and their dependence on water deliveries to maintain healthy ecosystems, Congress passed a [legislative mandate](#) that the BOR must provide adequate water supplies for critical wetlands. Congress also required the BOR to purchase or develop additional water to meet the full annual management needs of Central Valley wetlands. That congressional mandate included a base level of supply for public and private wetland refuge land, known as “level 2” supplies. Congress also required the BOR to purchase or develop additional “level 4” water supplies to meet the full annual management needs of Central Valley wetlands. BOR’s new recycled water project represents the first significant water development project to meet that 24 year-old “level 4” requirement.

The state’s drought has shown that wetlands, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley, are highly vulnerable. Without adequate water supplies, wetland managers have been unable to provide habitat for year-round resident waterfowl and for other wildlife, including the threatened giant garter snake. Reduced wetland water supplies also increases the risk of large-scale outbreaks of avian diseases, as have been seen in the Klamath Lake area. Finally, wintering waterfowl depend on food grown during the summer. Summer irrigation increases invertebrate numbers, as well as seeds on wetland plants, which are needed to sustain waterbirds during the winter. Years of analysis have shown that south of Delta waterfowl are particularly vulnerable to running out of food before the end of the migratory season.

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