

**YOLO BYPASS MANAGEMENT STRATEGY
STAKEHOLDERS WORKING GROUP MEETING NO. 7**

***DRAFT*
MEETING MINUTES**

MEETING DATE: May 12, 2000

LOCATION: California Department of Fish and Game
Yolo Wildlife Area Headquarters
45211 County Road 32B (Chiles Road)
Davis, CA 95616

IN ATTENDANCE: Robert Brown, Bull Sprig Outing Duck Club
Walt Cheechov, U.S. Department of Agriculture and National Resources
Conservation Services
Regina Cherovsky, Conaway Ranch and Reclamation District 2035
Anita DeLong, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Chuck Dudley, Joe Heidrick Enterprises
Mike Egan, Yolo Flyway Farms
Denny Eickmeyer, Yolo Wings and L. G. Duck Club
Dave Feliz, California Department of Fish and Game (DFG)
Chris Fulster Jr., Glide-In Ranch
Bill Harrell, California Department of Water Resources (DWR)
Yvonne LeMaitre, Glide Ranch Trustee
Bob Leonard, Yolo Basin Farms
Rick Martinez, Martinez Farming Co.
Duncan McCormack III, Yolo Ranch
Larry Minshall, Yolo Flyway Farms
Gary Moody, Yolo Wings
Dennis Murphy, Murphy Farms
Ricardo Pineda, California State Reclamation Board (Reclamation Board)
Greg Schmid, Los Rios Farms
Ted Sommer, DWR and University of California Davis (UCD)
Jim Staker, Conaway Ranch
Ed Towne, Bull Sprig Outing Duck Club
Will Wylie, H Pond Ranch
Robin Kulakow, Yolo Basin Foundation (YBF)
Dave Ceppos, Jones & Stokes
Alice McKee, Jones & Stokes
Jennifer Stock, Jones & Stokes

NEXT MEETING: The next Working Group meeting will be held on Thursday, June 29, 2000, from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the DFG Yolo Wildlife Area Headquarters. Lunch will be provided. Members of the Working Group are asked to call Jennifer Stock at 916/739-3086 to confirm their attendance.

ACTION ITEMS

1. Results from the proposed USFWS North Delta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) Public Survey are not yet complete. The results will be included in the Refuge decision document. The release date for this document has not been determined.

DECISIONS MADE

1. The Working Group approved the draft minutes from the April meeting. Those minutes will now be adopted as final.
2. The Working Group approved the draft CALFED Bay Delta Program (CALFED) proposal for submittal to CALFED with no changes.
3. The Working Group agreed to hold its meetings every 6 weeks, instead of every 4 weeks, for the remainder of the project.

SUMMARY OF MEETING

Introduction

Mr. Ceppos began the meeting by welcoming the group. He reviewed the agenda and asked for changes or additions; there were none. He then asked for changes or additions to the April 14, 2000, meeting minutes; there were none. The Working Group adopted the April meeting minutes as final.

Mr. Ceppos then asked the attendees to introduce themselves.

CALFED Proposal

Mr. Ceppos gave a brief overview of the draft CALFED proposal and opened the floor for discussion of the proposal. He explained that this was the Working Group's chance to raise any concerns or request changes before the proposal would be made final and submitted to CALFED on May 15, 2000. He explained that in the weeks prior to this meeting, the team authoring the proposal met with the Working Group's CALFED proposal subcommittee (Cherovsky, Fulster, Leonard, Martinez, Murphy, Tadlock, and Thompson) to review the proposal and receive input.

Mr. Fulster stated that the CALFED proposal subcommittee reviewed the draft in depth and he believed all the changes and concerns the Working Group may have had have been addressed. He suggested that the proposal be submitted to CALFED without changes.

Ms. Cherovsky supported Mr. Fulster's recommendation but added that the group should voice any final concerns.

Mr. Ceppos explained the main issues that were addressed in the proposal as a result of the subcommittee's input. These issues included:

- # the Reclamation Board and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers consider the Yolo Bypass (Bypass) to be at full design capacity for flood conveyance;
- # the baseline of current habitat conditions in the Bypass is unknown, which further supports a need to do studies to determine the present value of habitat in the Bypass;
- # the Working Group should receive any documents prepared in regards to the Bypass (e.g., documents prepared by DWR or DFG) or other agencies and organizations; and
- # the loss of groundwater recharge if rice fields are converted to habitat.

Terms used in the draft CALFED proposal were also refined to ensure that they precisely conveyed the Working Group's intent.

Mr. Ceppos continued by quoting a disclaimer that is featured on page 15 of the proposal, regarding the proposed Refuge. The following quote appears verbatim from the proposal text:

It is very important for CALFED decision makers to realize, however, that the authoring of and involvement in this proposal in no way reflects any approval, expressed or implied, of the proposed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service North Delta National Wildlife Refuge. The Working Group has determined no formal opinion as a group or as individuals in favor or denial of the proposed refuge.

Mr. Ceppos then went over the budget for the proposed project. The total budget requested in the final version was \$467,147.00.

Mr. Ceppos asked if there was a motion to approve the proposal as final.

The motion was made, seconded, and approved by the Working Group.

Mr. Martinez inquired if the Working Group should send letters to thank the authors who wrote support letters for the proposal.

Mr. Ceppos said that this was possible. He added that some agencies pledged support even though they were unable to provide a letter of support. Because these agencies are politically involved with CALFED, a letter of support would have been a conflict of interest.

Mr. Pineda said that the Reclamation Board supports the Working Group process but is heavily involved in CALFED and thus could not send a letter of support. He added, however, that the Reclamation Board is happy to support the Working Group process.

Mr. Ceppos told the Working Group that the Yolo County Board of Supervisors sent a letter of support but had hoped that the Working Group keep in mind that the County Supervisors are decision makers regarding land use in the county. Mr. Ceppos reiterated that the proposal language identifies the Working Group as an advisory organization rather than a decision-making body for the county. Another organization that sent a letter of support is the Dixon Resource Conservation District.

Mr. Murphy asked if there were any updates regarding the proposed Refuge.

Ms. DeLong responded that the USFWS is working on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Yolo County. She added that additional MOUs with the Reclamation Board and the Reclamation Districts are possible. There has been no decision on the establishment of the proposed Refuge; no decisions will probably be made for a couple of months.

Mr. Fulster inquired about the survey sent out regarding the proposed Refuge.

Ms. DeLong answered that the survey was done to get an idea of what Refuge boundaries people would support. She added that the survey's intent was to get input from people who did not want to review the environmental assessment in detail. The survey results are not yet compiled but will be included in the decision document for the proposed Refuge.

Ms. DeLong added that Mike Spears of USFWS is overseeing the decision-making process and wants to see an analysis of the comments. He wants to develop agreements with concerned and appropriate entities before any decisions are made regarding the proposed refuge.

Mr. Ceppos returned to the topic of the CALFED proposal by thanking the Working Group for its input and for the trust they've put in YBF and Jones & Stokes. He explained that the proposal will go through six review panels—three scientific reviews, one administrative review, the Ecosystem Roundtable, and finally a policy-level committee. He said that it will take 7 months, or until November 2000, for a decision to be made. If awarded, the money would be made available by February 2001 at the earliest.

Mr. Ceppos suggested that the Working Group meetings be changed from a 4-week to 6-week cycle. This change would better accommodate agricultural activities, allow more time for Management Strategy document preparation and Working Group review, give the hydrologic staff more time for field visits, and stretch the meetings into fall so that there is no downtime between the end of the current project and a potential start of the proposed new project in February. If it is awarded.

The Working Group agreed to this change.

Habitat-Friendly Agricultural Practices

Mr. Ceppos then introduced habitat-friendly agricultural practices as the next agenda item. He said to remember that the proposal states that landowners willing to implement these practices would expect fair compensation and adequate assurances. He then invited Regina Cherovsky of PG&E Properties to talk about habitat-friendly practices currently used at the Conaway Ranch.

Ms. Cherovsky gave a brief introduction and then introduced Jim Staker, farm manager at Conaway Ranch.

Mr. Staker began by giving a brief history of Conaway Ranch. The land was previously owned by Woodland Farms, Pasadena, California, who transformed the land from tule patches and rolling topography that supported productive rice crops. The ranch has land in the Bypass, Cache Creek Settling Basin, and Willow Slough Bypass. After PG&E Properties purchased the property, Ranch managers began slowly working with 25 tenant farmers to implement habitat-friendly agricultural practices. The ranch hired Mike Hall, wildlife manager, to address hunting and wildlife management issues on the ranch. Mr. Hall has been given a lot of flexibility to develop creative projects.

One agricultural practice that is being implemented is the use of flushing bars during the first cutting of alfalfa. Alfalfa is great nesting habitat for game bird hens, and contemporary cutting practices lead to a high mortality rate of hens and eggs. Conaway Ranch has found that early season habitat flushing, during the first cutting, allows the hens to re-nest in adjacent, safe habitat areas. He explained that brood fields are left fallow for at least a year and are located near the alfalfa fields to act as refuges for displaced hens. Flushing bars extend 6 to 8 feet in front of a harvester. These bars have chains that hang down with bells attached to them. They disturb the hens and flush them from their nests. Though effective, there is still some mortality. California Waterfowl Association published the results of a study undertaken, in conjunction with UCD, which shows that mortality rates are reduced significantly with the use of flushing bars. Conaway also works with volunteers to salvage eggs. Up to 1,000 eggs are sometimes collected and taken to hatcheries.

Mr. Murphy commented that the alfalfa is produced outside of the Bypass.

Mr. Ceppos asked what crops are being produced in the Bypass.

The Working Group answered that the main crops are corn, rice, and safflower. Other fields are pasture and irrigated pasture lands. Some of the landowners are already using limited wildlife-friendly agricultural practices.

Mr. Staker spoke about another practice that involves selective “cleaning” of vegetation around agricultural fields. Traditionally, all vegetation was cut and cleared from ditches, roads, and fields. Conaway Ranch, instead, leaves an 8- to 10-foot unharvested strip of wheat, corn, or rice in the fields. These techniques provide valuable corridors that provide protected routes to water and a source of food for wildlife. Additionally, the ranch also manages their water ditches to support wildlife use. Rather than cleaning out the entire ditch, they clean only half of a ditch in a given year, leaving the other side of the ditch with naturalized, often native, vegetation as a natural corridor.

Mr. Fulster asked if Conaway Ranch has established any predator control measures.

Mr. Staker answered that there isn't much of a predator problem at the ranch.

Mr. Staker added that many roads are wider than they need to be. By allowing vegetation to mature along the road edges, valuable habitat corridors can develop. Besides being beneficial to wildlife, these corridors provide visual diversity.

Mr. Fulster commented that predators that eat eggs, such as racoons, skunks, coyote, and opossums, are devastating to birds. These predators use corridors to travel.

Mr. Staker agreed but added that studies on the ranch have shown that there are relatively low levels of predation. High human and mechanical activity may account for these lows levels.

Ms. DeLong stated that flooding in the Bypass may reduce the number of predators as well.

Mr. Staker stated that the ranch tries to keep from 5 to 130 acres of brood ponds in the summer, yet stressed that 1 to 7 acre ponds are usually very effective. Fields with poor soils can be managed as ponds on a rotational basis. Conaway Ranch uses winter ponding to decompose the rice straw, because the acreage that can be burned is limited. These ponds can provide good winter habitat.

Mr. Staker said that Conaway Ranch has tried various methods of getting rid of rice straw. He explained that they have tried punching it into the mud, in hopes that it would decompose. Instead, it formed a dense mat of rice straw that created a need for additional operations to prepare the fields for planting. They do not roll the straw like this anymore, unless they need to hold water. Discing seems to be a better way to deal with the straw by breaking it up further, allowing the straw to be more effectively available for anaerobic processes to take place. It breaks down the straw and does not create a mat. Discing, however, creates an undesirable terrain for hunters to traverse but seems to be the next best thing to flooding, which flushes the straw out of the Bypass. Flooding is obviously an effective way of disposing of the straw through flows, but due to seasonal conditions, there are never guarantees that such flow event will occur.

Mr. Ceppos asked if there are any issues regarding wildlife that has affected the way that Conaway Ranch deals with rice straw.

Mr. Staker said that they use stripper heads whenever possible to maximize rice production yields from each field. Vegetation will be left on seasonally fallow fields with poor soils to provide nesting habitat. These fields are sometimes fertilized with ammonium sulfate to increase the quality of the habitat. They often plant cover crops (e.g., bell beans, vetch), which are beneficial to habitat, that are incorporated into the soil the next year for a natural fertilizer. Burns are used to clean the nesting areas every few years.

Mr. Wylie asked if the birds would nest again once they were flushed.

Mr. Staker said they would if the timing was right. They use the flushing bars once a year, during the first cutting, usually in the first week of April (depending on weather conditions).

Mr. Ceppos asked why Conaway Ranch made the management change to habitat-friendly practices.

Mr. Staker replied that the partners of Conaway Ranch had a desire and commitment to provide good hunting on the ranch. They realized that if the ranch was managed for wildlife they could improve habitat.

Mr. Fulster commented that Mike Hall is a very effective manager.

Ms. Cherovsky agreed and added that Conaway Ranch has great tenants as well. The keys to their success has been in educating the tenants to see the value in habitat-friendly practices, and in providing monetary incentives to follow such practices.

Mr. Staker continued that Conaway Ranch's tenants are becoming increasingly receptive and have been developing their own, new ideas of ways to improve habitat-friendly practices.

Mr. Staker then said that water clearly has been the biggest expense in instituting these practices, but that it is unavoidable because of the restrictions on rice burning.

Mr. Ceppos asked how much of the Bypass is tenant farmed.

The Working Group generally responded that there are probably more tenants than owners farming the land.

Mr. Cheechov said that habitat-friendly practices have to be in place for a couple of years for their benefits to be seen.

Mr. Fulster said that farmers could be paid to put the land into habitat.

Mr. Cheechov responded that if the land was put into a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) easement, they would be paid. However, he added, rental rates have been low, and the CRP puts limitations on the land (e.g., land cannot be grazed).

Ms. Cherovsky stated that the problem with a 10-year CRP contract is that the habitat becomes more established, making it harder to revert back to agriculture.

Mr. Cheechov stated that existing programs aren't realistic or beneficial to the landowners.

Ms. McKee inquired how Conaway Ranch makes these practices cost-effective for the tenants.

Mr. Staker replied that Conaway Ranch floods the tenant's fields to provide rice straw decomposition. If tenant's fields are not flooded, the rice straw is left on the fields. They also use practices that are most economical for the tenant.

Mr. McCormack said that there are some benefits (e.g., hunting habitat) to be gained from using habitat-friendly agricultural practices but stressed that there are economic costs.

Mr. Martinez brought up the issue of pest control. He explained that these habitat areas may provide overwintering locations for pests that are detrimental to crops. For example, habitat areas may include weeds that attract stink bugs, and if they are located near tomato fields, the crop may experience significant damage. Therefore, these weeds need to be controlled, because it is illegal to use the one chemical that can prevent the stink bug. He stated that weed control for crop protection would be easy on a large farm like Conaway Ranch, but is more difficult in areas where there are individual landowners on smaller plots.

Mr. Cheechov said that one possibility for addressing this issue could be to spray nonfood vegetation in habitat borders with chemicals instead of the crop. However, he stressed that it would take money to explore the feasibility of options like this one.

He added that no comprehensive studies have been undertaken to determine which weeds act as hosts to insects that are agricultural problems.

Mr. Martinez said that it would be useful to include potential pest control options, problems, concerns, and necessary compensation rates in the Management Strategy.

Conclusion

Mr. Ceppos said that the next agenda will include an initial draft of sections of the Management Strategy report. He added that the goal is for YBF and Jones & Stokes to develop preliminary text for the Working Group. The group may be broken down into subcommittees that will focus on particular sections of the document. He emphasized that the report will reflect the opinions, concerns, and interests of the landowners.

Mr. Ceppos continued that the hydrologists' water management field visits should be conducted by the next meeting. Their findings will be reported to the Working Group.

The next meeting was set for Thursday, June 29, 2000, from 10:30 a.m. until 1 p.m. at the DFG Yolo Wildlife Area Headquarters.

The meeting was adjourned.