

REAFFIRMING A LONG STANDING PARTNERSHIP

By H. Dale Hall, CEO, Ducks Unlimited, Inc



I recently had the opportunity to visit with Doug Federighi, Tom Mackey, Byron Hisey, Dennis Campini, Dale Boust, Dave Widell, Pepper Snyder and other leaders in the Grasslands and walked away with a much better appreciation

of the pain caused by the DU letter to Senator Feinstein. I had already reviewed the process that was followed prior to sending DU's letter regarding south of delta pumping restrictions and delta smelt and had concluded several mistakes were made, but the opportunity to hear first hand from the Grasslands was very impacting.

I came on board May 3, 2010, and I suppose I could just say "this happened before I got here". But that is not what I'm going to say. I am Ducks Unlimited now and everything about Ducks Unlimited operations stops at my desk. I believe it's my responsibility to do what I can to heal the pain caused by the letter and to rekindle the great and long standing partnership between DU and the Grasslands.

When the letter was being reviewed, neither the Interim CEO nor the President were given the opportunity to review the draft and make corrections, or simply say the letter should not go out. Our friends at Grasslands were not consulted nor asked for input on the draft, which is certainly not our normal procedure. But I believe the most significant mistake was not simply admitting we had made a mistake. I want to ensure that does not happen again.

Within the last two months we have instituted new (and formal) guidance to ensure policy position letters are reviewed by the President of DU and me. This will give us the chance to ask the questions that should have been asked prior to sending the letter. I believe the new policy structure will help us ensure that any letter sent by DU truly represents the policy position of DU.

As we move forward, my objective is to rebuild the long standing relationship between Grasslands and DU. You have been our friends, neighbors and partners for decades and I want to do all I can to put this incident behind us. I spent 6 years of my life working directly with you on water issues in California. I know the sensitivity and unintentional consequences that can come from inadequate communication. I realize that, with any partnership, there will be times when we disagree on what course of action to take. But with agreement or disagreement, we must ensure there is clear communication and neither of us is surprised by something the other does. With Mark Biddlecomb, Friz Reid, Chris Hildebrandt and the rest of the DU staff fully engaged to move us all forward, I know we can do great things. Thanks for being the friends you are and for giving this old friend a chance to mend fences.



MERCED FAIR WINS NATIONAL AWARDS FOR GRASSLAND DISPLAYS

By Carol Reiter

The Merced County Fair received two first place Agricultural Awards of Excellence from the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, headquartered in Springfield, Mo. The fair's "Wetlands, Water & Wildlife" feature exhibit took first place honors in the "Green Program" category for fairs with up to 100,000 in attendance. The exhibit showcased the thousands of acres of grasslands and wetlands in western Merced County used for farming, wildlife conservation and preservation, with an emphasis on what agriculture is doing to enhance conservation efforts.

The interactive exhibit gave fairgoers the sights, sounds, smells
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MERCED FAIR WINS NATIONAL AWARDS FOR GRASSLAND DISPLAYS **CONTINUED...**

and feel of the grasslands and wetlands to show the impact of this major migratory stop for birds.

The fair also won first place in the "Special Agricultural Exhibit for the Fairgoing Public" category for "Mr. Duck's Wild Ride, A Wetland Odyssey." This exhibit was a Rube Goldberg-like contraption designed to be a fun way to interpret the fair's theme and the importance of water in the San Joaquin Valley.

evaluated and judged by a team of industry leaders.

The awards were presented during the IAFE Agricultural Awards Breakfast on Nov. 30 during the 119th annual convention in Las Vegas.



The 2010 Agricultural Awards of Excellence are sponsored by John Deere. There are a total of 13 Agricultural Award categories which are

IN MEMORIAM

Carter H. Harrison



**CARTER H.
HARRISON**
NOV 10, 1914
- JAN 10, 2011
Carter passed
peacefully in his
sleep at the age of
ninety-six following
a brief illness

on January 10, 2011. Carter was born in Patterson, California to Fritz and Roberta Harrison. Carter graduated from Patterson High School in 1931 and Modesto Junior College in 1934. Prior to World War II, Carter worked as a ranch hand, bartender and land surveyor. In 1935, Carter met Agnes Vreedenberg. Carter and Agnes were married in 1936 and enjoyed seventy-three years together. In January 1941, Carter enlisted in the U.S. Navy where he served in a bomb disposal unit for the Seabees. During World War II, Carter saw action on Midway, Okinawa and Guam. Carter served with distinction and was honorably discharged in 1945. After the war, Carter moved to Modesto and was the sole proprietor of

"Carter Harrison Real Estate." Carter served the Modesto community as a commercial real estate broker for 61 years. Carter enjoyed tennis, golf, fishing and hunting. However, Carter's life long passion was duck hunting. Carter was responsible for the formation of Ducks Unlimited in Stanislaus County. In addition to being a member and Life Sponsor of Ducks Unlimited, Carter was also a member of California Waterfowl Association, Delta Waterfowl and Del Rio Golf and Country Club. Carter also served on the board of directors of the Grassland Water District and Grassland Resource Conservation District for over twenty years. Carter lived a full and robust life. He leaves behind a legacy that could never be duplicated. Carter was preceded in death by his loving wife Agnes, his brother Robert and his sister May Wreden. Carter is survived by his nephews, Henry Wreden and Carter Wreden. Carter will be sorely missed by his family, friends, his dog Cap and the Modesto business community. A celebration of life service will be scheduled at a later date.

PROTECTING THE GRASSLAND ECOLOGICAL AREA THROUGH BETTER PLANNING

CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT HAS BEEN CRITICAL IN PROTECTING CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST FRESHWATER MARSH FROM ENCROACHING DEVELOPMENT

BY DANIEL L. CARDOZO



Standing at the eastern end of Pacheco Pass in 1868 on his initial trek to Yosemite, John Muir described the plain that lay before him as knee-deep in "one continuous bed of honey-bloom." The San Joaquin's meandering riparian forest offered the only relief from the flowery carpet of Muir's celebrated "bee-pastures." After arriving at the forest's edge, Muir walked for miles under a great canopy of cottonwood, sycamore, willow, box elder and valley oak. Crossing the river at its confluence with the Merced, Muir marveled at the "fine jungle of tropical luxuriance" as he proceeded east on his portentous journey.

The landscape that inspired Muir's lyricism now lies within the 180,000 acre Grassland Ecological Area (GEA) in western Merced County, encompassing California's largest remaining freshwater marsh complex. The GEA includes several federal and state wildlife refuges, a state park and the largest block of privately owned and managed wetlands in California. The private lands are managed primarily for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife by the approximately 200 hunting clubs that operate within the GEA.

Today the GEA serves as a major wintering ground for Pacific Flyway species. Its diverse and interconnected habitats support large native migratory and resident wildlife populations, including a substantial and growing number of threatened and endangered species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and international treaties formally recognize the GEA as a resource of national and international significance.

Apart from its biological importance, the GEA provides substantial economic and

employment benefits to Merced County and surrounding communities. A recent study jointly sponsored by the Grassland Water District, the Great Valley Center and the Packard Foundation found that direct expenditures by public and private land managers in the GEA, combined with expenditures related to hunting and other recreational uses, contribute almost \$50 million annually to the local economy and account for 800 jobs.

Despite its importance, perennial proposals to develop lands within the GEA or the critical buffer zone adjacent to the core habitat continually imperil the restoration effort. Habitat fragmentation and degradation from encroaching urban development remain the greatest threat to the long-term viability of the resource.

Five separate planning and permitting jurisdictions have adopted spheres of influence or projected growth boundaries that directly conflict with the GEA boundary or that extend into the sensitive transitional lands. No regional planning process or state regulation guides or coordinates local land use decisions or otherwise protects the GEA from incompatible development.

CEQA is the only mechanism for comprehensive and coordinated land use and resource planning in the GEA. It has played an indispensable role in enabling the restoration of the resource by informing and influencing decision-making on a long series of development proposals in or adjacent to the GEA. Even more important for the longterm, the CEQA process is shaping relevant General Plan policies to take into account the protection of the GEA.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, largescale residential development proposals appeared for the first time in this formerly remote region. More recently, rural subdivisions, industrial and institutional development, a local airport and a high speed rail line and station have been proposed in the GEA. Several projects proposed east of Los Banos

within a narrow biological corridor linking the northern and southern refuge lands have been of particular concern.

The assessment of these projects under CEQA has served essential planning objectives. It has allowed for consultation between the agencies responsible for resource management within the GEA and the agencies responsible for land use planning and permitting. It has provided local jurisdictions with limited staff and financial resources access to sophisticated scientific and expert analysis from a variety of sources. It has created a forum for private refuge managers, waterfowl hunting and habitat conservation groups, agricultural interests and other stakeholders to inform local decision-makers of the biological, economic, and recreational significance of the GEA, an area that local planning authorities had largely ignored.

The original research and technical analysis presented in the successive CEQA project assessments has produced a detailed portrait of the GEA and its needs. It has also identified the significant and unavoidable effects that would result from urban encroachment. The cumulative impact analysis prepared with these assessments has effectively bridged a fragmented local planning process by requiring consideration of projects outside of the lead agency's jurisdiction and by ensuring that the needs of the larger GEA ecosystem are taken into account. As a direct result of the information disclosed through CEQA, every major development proposal in the GEA biological corridor or in the transitional agricultural lands has been either rejected by local landuse decision-makers, abandoned by applicants or deferred

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for further study. These CEQA studies have also fostered a greater understanding and appreciation of the GEA's broader importance by local decision-makers, which in turn is informing long-range planning decisions.

In 1999, the City of Los Banos substantially revised its General Plan to establish a new eastside urban limit line and to redirect urban expansion away from the GEA.

CEQA's mandate for integrated planning and environmental review also enabled the City, through the General Plan Environmental Impact Report, to develop a number of special policies designed to protect the natural resources that lie just beyond the City boundary.

The GEA is a remnant of a vast Central Valley wetland ecosystem that once covered

4 million acres. With 95 percent of this habitat lost to urban and agricultural development, the continued restoration and protection of the GEA is critically important. The last twenty years have clearly demonstrated that land use planning informed by meaningful CEQA review is our only hope of preserving this unique legacy of California's native landscape.

CWA GRANT NOTICE

California Waterfowl Association will be submitting a federal North American Conservation Act grant for wetland and upland habitat work. The grant will be conducted in the San Joaquin Valley focused on the Grasslands Ecological Area. The grant will be pay a portion of the project

costs and landowners will have to agree to a long term protection and management plan. Work will be conducted in 2012 and 2013. Interested landowners should contact Richard Wright, CWA San Joaquin Valley Regional Biologist, at (916)275-1020



JUDGE RULES ON DELTA SMELT

STATEMENT BY THOMAS W. BIRMINGHAM, GENERAL MANAGER, WESTLANDS WATER DISTRICT



The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California issued its decision on the validity of the Delta smelt biological opinion, which was released in December 2008. Judge Oliver Wanger's balanced and carefully articulated ruling marks another important victory for good science and the public interest. As the court concludes, "The public cannot afford sloppy science and uni-directional prescriptions that ignore California's water needs."

Westlands joined with the State of California and other public water agencies serving two-thirds of California's people in bringing this action challenging the federal restrictions on water deliveries which have severely reduced public water supplies, eliminated thousands of jobs and cost the

state's economy billions of dollars. We are thrilled with the court's decision, which will send the current federal biological opinion on Delta smelt back to the Fish and Wildlife Service for a thorough overhaul.

Among other things, the district court has found that:

- The Fish and Wildlife Service failed to rely on the best scientific data available in violation of the Endangered Species Act;
- The limits on flows set by the smelt biological opinion were arbitrary and capricious, relying on a deeply flawed and inappropriate methodology;
- The Fish and Wildlife Service's manipulation of data created material bias in violation of the Endangered Species Act;

There is no support in the scientific evidence for the biological opinion's assertion that operations of the state and federal pumps have contributed to the impacts of other stressors on the smelt.

Judge Wanger's ruling brings us another step closer to accomplishing California's coequal goals of restoring the Delta environment and ensuring that the public will have an adequate and reliable water supply. California's water needs for the future require that everyone share a commitment to conservation, strict attention to the best practices of wise water use and a readiness to making sure that our use of water is accomplishing the beneficial effects we intend. This ruling will help to assure that those same prescriptions are applied to the federal government as well.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER

(*LIMNODROMUS SCOLOPACEUS*)



Photo by: Stuart Mackay

Identification: Robin-sized stocky bird, overall brown with a light belly. This bird's bill is long and straight – designed perfectly for pulling insects out of the mud. In flight, look for a white patch on the rump. Call is a soft yet shrill “keek” repeated in flight or while foraging. The similar looking Short-billed Dowitcher has not been recorded in winter in the Valley and only in very small numbers during spring and fall.

When in California's Central Valley: Fall, Winter, and Spring (July – April).

The Long-billed Dowitcher spends its winters from Northern California south through Mexico. In California, many Long-billed Dowitchers flock in groups of tens of thousands to wetlands and flooded agricultural lands of the Central Valley. Dowitcher numbers are lowest in the Valley during fall migration, as birds make their way south from arctic breeding grounds. Their numbers increase through winter, as fall

migrants settle into the area for winter and sometimes as birds move inland from coastal habitats. Numbers are also high during spring migration, as birds make their way back to the thawing, richly productive tundra to nest.

Habitat: Primarily shallowly flooded wetlands and agricultural lands
The Long-billed Dowitcher, with its rapid up-and-down “sewing-machine” motion, will forage in water up to its belly, often submerging its head and bill entirely, but is limited to shallow-water habitats (<6” deep).

Diet: Small aquatic invertebrates

Conservation Tips: Recent analyses suggest dowitchers may be declining across California

Water depth is the most important variable influencing habitat use by foraging waterbirds in the late winter and early spring in the Grasslands of the San Joaquin Valley. To provide appropriate habitat during these times, you can partially dewater wetlands in winter to average depths of 6 to 8 inches, as well as stagger the timing of flood-up and draw-downs. Shallowly flooded habitat is also needed in fall, when you can flood most wetlands less deep, or, in agricultural land shallowly flood fallow

Photo by: Steve N. G. Howell III



fields beginning in late July.

To learn more about shorebirds, to discuss habitat management recommendations, or to get involved in the winter Pacific Flyway Shorebird Survey, contact Khara Strum at PRBO Conservation Science (kstrum@prbo.org; 530.219.7207).



Photo by: Steve N. G. Howell III

SHOREBIRDS AREN'T JUST AT THE SHORE!

The term ‘shorebird’ refers to the group of birds whose lives are tied to places where water saturates land. These birds are typically thought of as being found solely on beaches and in coastal estuaries; however, this is a misconception. Many shorebirds breed in grassland areas like the tundra in Alaska, the Great Plains in the Midwest, and the grasslands and shrublands of the high desert in the west. During the fall, shorebirds then migrate to more temperate and even tropical wetlands (interior and coastal) or beaches to spend the winter.



Photo by: Steve N. G. Howell III

In California, many of the shorebirds that visit each year can be found in the interior wetlands and agricultural fields of the Central Valley. These habitats provide the soft, muddy substrates preferred by so many shorebird species who probe with their sensitive bills for buried treasures - small aquatic invertebrates.

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GRASSLAND FUND OPENER AND STILLBOW EVENTS RAISE NEARLY \$60,000

Thanks to the hard work of Dennis Campini, Dale Boust, Grassland staff and the entire GWD/GRCD Board of Directors, the two fundraising events held this year for the Grassland Fund far exceeded expectations. Attendance at both events was overflowing (along with the gin) and both were completely sold out. GWD President Pepper Snyder graciously hosted the opening day event at Sprig Haven Duck Club, and the Stillbow Duck Club had agreed to have their annual fundraiser this year to support the Grassland Fund, which is dedicated to the conservation, education and legal defense of the Grasslands with all proceeds going directly into Grassland's issues.

"None of this could have been possible without the hard work of our staff and board members, in particular Dennis Campini and Dale Boust, and the incredible support of Grassland duck clubs and landowners", said David Widell, General Manager. "Thanks to their hard work, and the donations we had already received based on our \$2 dollar per acre voluntary assessment, we came very close to our annual fundraising goal, which is pretty amazing considering this is a fledgling effort," added Widell.

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DUCKS UNLIMITED VISITS THE GRASSLANDS



From left to right:

Fritz Reid, Mark Biddlecomb, Derek Mynear, Dave Widell, Dale Hall, Chris Hildebrandt, Ric Ortega, Pepper Snyder, Byron Hisey, Tom Mackey, Doug Federighi, Paul Bonderson