

Tulare Lake Basin Working Group
April 1, 2011
NRCS – 3530 W. Orchard Ct., Visalia
1:00 – 4:30 p.m.
Meeting Summary

1. **Welcome and self introductions**

2. **Strategic Plan Review** (*attachment: "TBWP Strategic Plan CONDENSED Mar 2011"*) (**Johanna Lombard**)

Johanna Lombard reviewed the 2011 to 2013 TBWP strategic plan that will guide the organization's conservation and capacity building activities during the next three years. TBWP will be working with its members in the TBWG to implement the outcomes outlined in the plan.

3. **Greenprint Overview** (**Clark Thompson**)

The nascent "Greenprint" effort (since it was unfunded until now) has, thus far, been staff supported. While Blueprint efforts focused primarily on issues affecting cities in the 8-County area, Greenprint will focus on rural lands. They have \$275,000 available for 1 year (phase 1) to work with mapping (out of U.C., Davis) and they are just getting started on open space issues such as:

- agricultural land,
- habitat,
- the urban/rural interface,
- regional parks
- water

Clark has offered to give an update at the next TBWG meeting.

4. **(A) Tulare Basin water supply and wetland development** (**Scott Frazer, Kern NWR**)

Scott clarified that this agenda item is regarding water supply for PRIVATE wetlands in the Tulare Basin. People often confuse comments made by USFWS staff as requests for REFUGE Water Supply. However, because the CVPIA (Central Valley Project Improvement Act) addressed the needs of Refuge water supply the critical needs are primarily for *private wetland* owners.

One suggested method of addressing the private wetland water supply needs would be to have the new Watershed Coordinator, Kathy Wood, assigned to pursue one or more project-related activities to secure more reliable, more affordable water sources (for private wetlands). There are several examples of projects that have been initiated by the Tulare Basin Wetlands Association that would benefit from having the active support of the staff time provided by the Watershed Coordinator. One example of this would be working to secure funding to purchase the 2100-acre site north of Garces Hwy, west of Rowlee road in Kern County to be operated as a reservoir site. Another example would be to integrate the proposed reservoir into the proposed West to East Pintail Slough canal system. There is currently a source of free water leaving Kern NWR that could be made available to deliver for reuse to benefit private wetlands. For example, the BLM was able to get plenty of water for its wetlands this year, but in a typical year not all wetlands get flooded due to water cost limitations.

Scott suggested the formation of a TBWG solar focus group. CSG (John McCaull) has offered to assist with this and with ongoing solar strategy for the region; now an active follow up item for the TBWG/TBWP and CSG.

5. **(B) Solar Energy, water supply, wetlands maintenance and development (Pat Marchbanks, TBWA; Steve Laymon, BLM)** Tulare Basin Wetlands Association (TBWA) water projects include the North Pintail Slough, which ties into the Alpaugh Canal and is 80% complete. Alpaugh and Semitropic water districts now have a water exchange agreement in place. The West-East Pintail Slough project is on hold; Semitropic and Buena Vista water districts are still working on the water exchange agreement. TBWA is trying to get federal money for solar projects. Several private wetland owners are prepared to put up matching funds for a solar initiative to permanently sustain wetlands. Pat recommended having each property in a federal easement program to have the ability to tie in to surface water. Semitropic has solar fields and the management expertise to handle this. TBWA is considering a solar cooperative for wetland owners. They are hoping to find partners to credit energy on an annual basis.

Steve Laymon reported that the BLM Atwell Island project has been approached by a solar company to put a solar field in the eastern part of the project. The hope is that the project will get its own solar field to produce the electricity needed to pump water for the wetlands. (For a 350-acre wetland, 2/3 of a megawatt needed annually for pumping).

Suggestions/Comments: Granville Homes (Maricopa Group) is transferring hundreds of acres in Kern County into solar fields and could provide advice or act as a potential partner. Elizabeth Brady and Aimee Epstein (see attendant/contact list on first page) with Recurrent Energy are available to talk. CSG is also available to help. Scott suggested a phone conference study session to create a solar working group.

6. **Tricolored blackbird program (Keiller Kyle, Audubon)**

Tricolored blackbird is nearly a California endemic species with a high percentage of the global population residing in the Tulare Basin; it is the largest colonial land bird in North America and the last species in North America that forms dense, large colonies as a breeding strategy. Colonies can exceed 50,000 individuals. The species has declined 90% in the last 80 years and is now a species of special concern. Remaining colonies of tricolored blackbirds often consolidate on agricultural lands creating tension between conservationists and farmers. Protection strategy is two-fold: 1) Protect large colonies in existence via the silage delay or silage buyout program (government money is used to provide financial incentive for farmers who have tricolored populations – typically triticale fields near dairy farms – to delay harvest until after tricolored breeding season.) Audubon wants to continue this program but there is currently no money and no good alternative. 2) Creation of new habitat – This includes more efficient use of existing habitat, especially duck club wetlands. Audubon is working with local duck clubs to create flooded spring wetlands with cattails – tricolored habitat. Audubon is also looking into solar energy for pumping water. There is also a push to create new upland and wetlands habitat, especially on low-yield or fallow ag lands or on the edges of farmland habitat.

Finally, the tricolored blackbird working group is working with US FWS to do a tricolored blackbird survey April 15 – 17. They're looking for volunteers to do search and counts. To volunteer, contact Keiller, kkyle@audubon.org, go to www.tricolor.ice@ucdavis.edu or google tricolor blackbird portal.

7. Sonoma County Agricultural, Preservation and Open Space District as a potential model for southern San Joaquin counties, and Williamson Act local alternatives update (John McCaull, CSG)

John lives in Sonoma and feels that the open space district is a good fiscal operational model. This special district was set up in 1990 through voter-approved measures. In 1990 voters approved a ¼ cent sales tax over a 20-year period. In 2006 a measure to extend the tax to 2031 passed with 77% of the vote. This sales tax provides an annual funding stream to implement Sonoma County General Plan Open Space and Ag Resources elements. The County only operates in unincorporated areas and only works with willing sellers to protect land. (Sonoma has a strong city-centered growth General Plan) So far 76,000 acres have been purchased or protected. The Sonoma County Board of Directs serve as the districts Board of Directors and a five-member Open Space Authority oversees the District's budget. Although the district has done several resource and habitat projects, agriculture has been the main focus and beneficiary. John pointed out that the days of California having a lot of money for conservation are drawing to a close; counties and cities need to figure out local funding measures and initiatives. The Sonoma district authority is a successful model for integrating land, water and other resource uses on the county level and also provides a model for facilitation of County General Plan implementation. John can arrange to make presentations regarding this model to County supervisors, farmers, etc. and can arrange for Sonoma County Supervisors, farmers, etc. to join such presentations. www.sonomaopenspace.org

Williamson Act update: When the governor signed the most recent budget, 10 million dollars in subvention payments were cut. The Nielsen program that would have allowed Williamson Act easement holders to renegotiate their contracts for a 10% reduction in order to keep 90% of their property value was also cut.

8. CA legislative update and CA Administration topics of note (Tasha Newman, CSG)

- State Budget: The Governor is focused on solving budget problems. The Governor's budget is a mix of cuts and tax extensions. The cuts went through but the legislature can't agree to take a tax extension to the voters in a June special election. Governor Brown can put it out as an initiative, but he's running out of time. Lots of cuts are happening, several state parks will be closing or have reduced hours and service. There are also threats to WCB bond funding re-appropriations, DWR programs, the Department of Conservation, etc. The good news is that the funding that was appropriated in the last two years is still available but everything is taking longer to get through the Department of Finance. There is no spring bond sale but a fall bond sale is planned.
- New appointments: John Laird is the new Natural Resources Secretary; Karen Ross is the new Food and Ag Secretary but there generally has not been a lot of new secretary appointments.
- An 11 Billion dollar water bond is on the 2012 ballot and will be there unless a new one is written. There have been a few different proposals to modify, change funding, etc. but no serious discussion about the water bond - and there is unlikely to be one until the budget is passed.

- A general welfare tax exemption bill has been introduced that would provide exemptions to non-profits including those that operate, own or manage land for natural resource purposes – this could greatly affect the land trust community.

9. High Speed Rail Update and discussion (Bart Bohn and Cheryl Lehn, URS Corp)

Bart Bohn, with URS Corp. gave a quick summary on the latest developments for CA High Speed Rail (HSR). The CA HSR will be steel rail on steel wheel, double track, with operating speeds up to 220 mph. The alignment will not be settled until the environmental documents are processed (HSR is presently in the middle of the CEQA/NEPA process.) HSR will be 100% clean electric power. County roads will be maintained on 1 mile spacing throughout the alignment. Phase 1 will cover 520 miles: San Francisco – San Jose - over Pacheco pass – station in Merced – Station in Fresno – Station in the vicinity of Hanford – Station in Bakersfield – over Tehachapi pass – emerging in a wind farm in Mojave – Station in Palmdale – San Fernando Valley – Stations in Los Angeles leading to Anaheim. This system, or a subset of this system will be where revenue starts. California’s population is expected to hit 50 million by 2035; money will either be spent on upgrading and expanding our highway infrastructure or on HSR. We’re out of capacity on commuter flights. At full buildout there will be as many as 10 trains/hour in each direction. Ticket cost will likely be about 80% of discount airfare between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Funding will come from Federal, State, and private investors. The first stretch will be a Merced – Fresno or Fresno – Bakersfield segment with construction beginning in 2012. The draft EIR/EIS is scheduled to be released in Summer 2012 followed by a formal comment period. See www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov for more information.

9. Organizing and launching a programmatic Federal, State and County Safe Harbor (Rick Kuyper, USFWS)

A safe harbor agreement is an agreement between the USFWS and a landowner in which landowners create habitat on their property and in exchange are not subjected to additional regulation if that habitat attracts endangered species. A programmatic Safe Harbor agreement is essentially an umbrella permit for multiple Safe Harbors. The Safe Harbor administrator holds the permit and has the ability to sign up additional landowners. Only agencies with regulatory enforcement capability can hold a permit for a programmatic Safe Harbor. Potential applications in the South Valley include situations in which farmers are spending money to maintain land in a way that discourages endangered species habitation (i.e. disc every year). Programmatic Safe Harbors eliminate a lot of red tape for landowners but they can take a long time to put together. In areas where an awareness of Safe Harbor is relatively new, it might be better to start small with individual landowners.

10. Tulare Basin IRWM update (Dick Moss, Provost and Pritchard)

The Tulare Basin IRWM group represents 6-7 sub regional IRWM groups and meets monthly to review issues common to all groups, share information and do some regional planning. Several sub regional groups recently applied for implementation grants totaling 33 million dollars but

only 13 million dollars is available to this region. Application results are expected in 1-2 months. Another round of planning grants and Regional Acceptance Process reviews is coming up. Grant scoring requires an environmental component, which is where TBWP comes in. There was some discussion that the cost of putting together an IRWM group and developing an application is onerous and cost-prohibitive. CSG will help; Tasha and John will talk to CSG Principals to brainstorm some ideas, which they will share with the group.

11. Tulare Basin Watershed Coordinator grant update (Dick Moss, Provost and Pritchard & TBWP, Kathy Wood McLaughlin; Brian Leahy, Department of Conservation)

TBWP received a 300,000-dollar watershed coordinator grant, which will fund a 3-year watershed coordinator position to serve the Tulare Basin. Kathy Wood McLaughlin has agreed to be the Watershed Coordinator. Kathy's work will include coordinating with the IRWM groups to help incorporate environmental aspects to IRWM projects and consider other (non-water) natural resources. TBWP is obligated to try to find long-term funding for the Watershed Coordinator. Carole Combs thanked Brian Leahy with CA Department of Conservation for his support. She also thanked NRCS for providing a cash match (WRP program development will be a big part of the Watershed Coordinator's work) and CVJV for their support. Brian said that the DOC will hopefully send out a contract this month and have the money distributed by the end of June.

Kathy Wood McLaughlin gave a brief background of her career in resource management.

12. Tulare Lake Basin Working Group name discussion (Carole Combs, TBWP)

Carole expressed concern that the name "Tulare *Lake* Basin Working Group" creates a (false) impression that the group is focused on restoring Tulare Lake. Specifically, TBWP's work was misrepresented in the press releases following the Watershed Coordinator grant announcement. Carole suggested changing the name to the "Tulare Basin Working Group." All present agreed. This group will therefore be known henceforth as the Tulare Basin Working Group (TBWG).

13. Central Valley Joint Venture "all bird" and watershed expansion plans, results of the recent JV lobbying trip to D.C., and an update on current CVJV partner organization funding concerns (Bob Shaffer, CVJV)

A) CVJV has expanded its area of interest from the Valley floor to the top of the watersheds. The focus is still avian-centric, including birds, riparian systems, mountain meadows, etc. A working group has formed to identify focal watersheds where habitat is most needed to benefit water supply, avian species, and ensure population connectivity. The working group is still looking to expand its partnerships; specifically, the CVJV wants to go into areas where a CVJV partnership can add value. B) There are 19 Joint Venture (JV) partnerships throughout the nation; in March they went to D.C. to discuss the Farm Bill, North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA), and to ask for increased funding for Joint Ventures. C) Bob passed out a handout showing proposals received by the Landscape Conservation Cooperative (which

now covers from Shasta area to Baja). They received 170 proposals; 41 finalists were shown on a handout (including one from Sequoia NP); 8-10 will probably get funded.

14. Ducks Unlimited/California Waterfowl Tulare Basin NAWCA project update and TBWG tour Spring 2012 (Chris Hildebrandt, DU)

DU is 90% done with its NAWCA project work and is developing a proposal for another NAWCA grant for July of this year. DU is also looking to use Delano treated effluent for Tulare Basin wetlands. Less than 5 miles of pipeline is needed and would make about 600,000 AF of water available. DU is also working on an engineering/design plan to give to the Regional Water Quality control board to get more treated effluent on to the landscape. The Regional Water Quality Control Board will hopefully decide treatment specifics after they see DU's plan. TBWP will work with DU and California Waterfowl Association (CWA) to visit DU and CWA NAWCA sites next spring.

15. UC Merced NRS field station at Atwell Island update and Jackson House funding needs (Steve Laymon, BLM)

BLM and UC Merced have been discussing the possibility of a UC Natural Reserve System field station at Atwell Island for years. Recently one of the houses on the project has been vacated by the occupant, and Steve expects that he will start getting pressure to get rid of the house rather than spend money to maintain it, which puts some time pressure on the project. The building is about 6,000 square feet and would be a great foundation for the field station. In short, enough funding needs to be raised to encourage UC Merced to come in and take over maintenance. About 2 million is needed to get the field station started but Steve believes that realistic ideas for where/how the money could be raised might be enough to encourage the BLM management team to keep the house. Roger Bales and Armando Quintero are the primary contacts at UC Merced, and Steve Johnson with CSG is working on potential funding sources for this project.

16. Next meeting: October 28, 2011 at NRCS – Visalia.