

Tulare Basin Working Group

May 1, 2014

Facilitator: Larry Saslaw, TBWP advisor and BLM Emeritus

Meeting notes

1. Attendees

Name	Organization	Email	Phone
Bill Cooper	Kern River Parkway Foundation	Wtcooper47@aol.com	(661) 205-3879
Bill Moffat	CA State Parks	Bill.moffat@parks.ca.gov	(661) 201-9275
C. Jeff Thomson	TBWA/TBWP	Jeflain2@aol.com	(661) 332-2475
Carole Combs	TBWP	ccombs@thegrid.net	(559) 799-7204
Chris Hildebrandt	DU	childebrandt@ducks.org	(209) 761-8400
Derek Mynear	DU	dmynear@ducks.org	(209) 761-8401
Dave Clendenen	Vollmar Consulting	dave@vollmarconsulting.com	
Elizabeth Palmer	NRCS	Elizabeth.palmer@ca.usda.gov	(559) 734-8732 x 134
Harry Love	Kern Audubon	Love3@bad.rr.com	(661) 805-1420
Ian LeMay	Representative Costa	ian.lemay@mail.house.gov	(559) 905-7751
Jon Pickett	California Waterfowl	jpickett@calwaterfowl.org	(916) 662-5776
Kathy McLaughlin	Watershed Coordinator	kwoodmclaughlin@gmail.com	(559) 360-0798
Larry Saslaw	TBWP	Larry7719@sbcglobal.net	(661) 706-2673
Mark Salvaggio	Supervisor David Couch	salvaggio@co.kern.ca.us	(661) 868-3680
Nick Stanley	USFWS	Nick_stanley@fws.gov	(661) 725-2767 x 204
Rich O'Neil	Kern River Parkway Fdn.	Oneilpedal4@gmail.com	(661) 706-1096
Ruth Ostroff	USFWS/CVJV	Ruth_ostroff@fws.gov	(916) 414-6460
Sarah Campe	TBWP	sgcampe@gmail.com	(559) 640-7050
Scott Frazer	USFWS	Scott_frazer@fws.gov	(661) 725-2767
Steve Larson	BLM	slarson@blm.gov	(661) 391-6099
Trevor Meadows	River Partners	tmeadows@riverpartners.org	(209) 996-3534

2. Long term impact of drought on Tulare Basin species and migratory waterfowl; Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV) recommended drought-response actions - Ruth Ostroff, CVJV

- The Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV) is a public/private partnership of 21 organizations that meets quarterly to look at ways to maximize resources for migratory birds. There are 9 focal areas within the Central Valley – the Tulare Basin is the southernmost and the largest. Water is the CVJV’s highest priority this year; it’s working to meet the CVPIA refuge water level 4 commitment. The CVJV’s legislative affairs committee and water committees now meet jointly. CVJV is lobbying in Washington DC and Sacramento, focusing on the water bond – keeping money in it for cost share and for the Pressley program, which is a wetland habitat program that pays about \$10 an acre to flood up and maintain water.
- *Comments:*
 - Carole Combs mentioned that Congressman Costa and Senator Boxer are working on a promising bill right now.
 - There will be about 20,000 AF of additional water coming to south of the Delta pending Bureau of Reclamation approval – about 5,000 of which is for refuges/environmental supply. This is the only release approved lately.
 - The IRWM groups need to do species vulnerability assessments; which ties in with the work the CVJV is doing.

3. Updates and perspectives re: federal, state and local Congressional drought-related water legislation

- *Ian LeMay, Congressman Costa’s Office:* Ian now longer represents Kern, but he works closely with Congressman Valadao’s office. The Senate is working on a piece of companion legislation to Valadao’s bill that passed the house 2 months ago. Feinstein and Boxer also introduced legislation in February – since then, Feinstein has taken out \$300M of funding and reintroduced; she’s looking to bypass the committee hearing and bring it straight to the floor. For the past several weeks, the Congressman’s office has been meeting with other offices to preconference – take the best pieces of the senate and house versions of the bill and combine into a workable bill that will pass the Senate and the House – not a historically easy task. A priority right now, working with DWR and the Bureau of Reclamation, is to determine California’s water deficit. How far back do you go? Refuge needs are included – where are they being shorted? How much do they need? Once that is determined then we can work on backfilling the deficit. There are also debates about how much water storage is needed and the amount of the bond. The bond might be delayed until August to buy the legislature some time. We’re too far in to this water year to make an impact, so we’re looking at long-term solutions.
- *Comments:*
 - Carole Combs: Something to keep in mind for the legislative toolbox: reinstate the Federal Land Retirement program? (see Carolyn Lochhead’s article at: <http://www.sfgate.com/science/article/California-drought-Central-Valley-farmland-on-5342892.php>) Ian LeMay replied that the program is part of the conversation, although it probably won’t happen during this year’s regular session. *Ian suggested Carole follow up with Scott Peterson, Congressman Costa’s Chief of Staff.*
- **TBWG Feedback, Questions, Updates:**
 - Jonathan Pickett – CWA:* CWA recently acquired 2200 acres in Goose Lake Bottoms; the properties have access to groundwater and surface water and are being prepped to be flooded next year with a goal to eventually flood 1500 acres. The property was purchased with WCB money and then the landowner gifted the money back, which is being used as an endowment for O & M.

CWA also received a NAWCA grant to convert 160 acres of an old mosquito research area back to wetland. There are a number of small, NAWCA-funded infrastructure improvements being done on other wetlands and one to help Kern with conveyance.

ii. *Dennis Slater, Jeff Thomson – TBWA:* During the tour and at the meeting, the importance of private wetlands for habitat was emphasized, but a declining interest in hunting and increasing costs associated with maintaining private wetlands have reduced the number of duck and hunt clubs: in the 1930s and 40s, there were hundreds; now there are about 30. Another major factor is the high value of ag land – ground that was worth \$500/acre 5 years ago is now worth \$4,000; it's tempting for clubs to sell out. Federal easement programs help. Many of the clubs are only flooding a portion of their wetlands this year; energy bills are high and groundwater is dropping. Many clubs are in the Semitropic WSD: Semitropic recently voted to add a \$100/acre assessment. Duck/Hunt clubs don't have a funding base, so this assessment hits them hard – and may push some out of business. Local groups and the Regional Board are working with Semitropic to reduce or eliminate the assessment for clubs, but it's a hard sell since clubs pump groundwater too. Semitropic can show that they benefit wetlands by allowing a shallower pumping depth because of water storage – the wetlands should therefore pay an assessment. DU and TBWA are negotiating with Semitropic now.

iii. *Chris Hildebrandt, Derek Mynear – DU:* DU recently received NAWCA grant approval for four projects in the Tulare Basin: 2 are in Mendota, including a private wetland; 1 is in the Fresno/Kings River watershed, helping a landowner install a well for a WRP wetland easement that currently does not have water; 1 project will flood the east side of Goose Lake more regularly. This final project is in partnership with Semitropic WSD and will also store excess water in spring and summer for ag (up to 5,000 AF), and credit TBWA for water to use for wetlands. WCB is funding the non-NAWCA portion of that project and Semitropic is supplying the pump. Semitropic can wheel excess water anywhere within the district – this is a benefit of partnering with them.

DU is also working on the Delano Recycled Water Wetland Enhancement Project (DRIP). Delano's recycled water is now going to a farm managed by the city, but Delano wants to sell the property and give that water (7,000-11,000 AF) to DU and TBWA. Wetlands are one of the best places for recycled water. DU and TBWA are working with Semitropic to manage the water. Conveyance would be through an 8-mile pipeline to the Alpaugh canal, which would cost 2 – 2.5M dollars. An alternative, 3-mile pipeline through Semitropic would cost about \$700,000. Wastewater flows are steady – duck clubs wouldn't know what to do with water in the spring and summer, so they're looking for ag partners to take that water during those months. Semitropic is concerned about water quality issues, but it's also a benefit to them because surface water would be used in lieu of groundwater. It's a strenuous permitting process - approval from the RWQCB and the Department of Public Health would be necessary. DWR drought funding is a potential funding source, but there may not be enough time to have the deliverable ready by the July due date. There is also potential funding through NAWCA, WCB, IRWM groups or Semitropic. *Kathy and Chris will talk about possibly going for IRWM Implementation funding.*

iv. *Trevor Meadows – River Partners:* River Partners focuses more on riparian than on wetlands. Groundwater levels have dropped in areas where they're pumping from wells, which incurs additional costs. River Partners recently completed 2,000 acres of restoration in the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge, which results in retiring

water but leads to more water being pumped downstream. This is a potential cash cow – riparian forests have the majority of their roots in the top 30 feet of soil, most of which is saline and can't be used anyway. River Partners would like to do an economic analysis to see the benefit of restoration to downstream water users, but there's no money for the analysis. One benefit of the drought is that it's easier to get equipment in to do invasive species removal, so River Partners is taking advantage of that.

- v. *Steve Larson, Jihadda Govan – BLM/AIP:* BLM is wrapping up a land use plan covering BLM-administered lands – it should be complete in late summer/early fall. It will give Atwell Island (AI) and areas of critical environmental concern heightened status. The Bureau of Reclamation has agreed to provide funding for AI for several more years. Restoration at AI continues; BLM will close out the farming operations in a few years. BLM is now entertaining proposals to have someone maintain use and access to the wells – anyone interested should talk to Jihadda. AI does not have surface water and pumping expenses are high. There was a pending application for a solar facility in the SE corner of AI and some hopes of partnering with the company for an ongoing funding source, but the application was recently withdrawn. Orchards are going in all around that will also depend on groundwater, which is concerning. There was originally a vision to connect AI and Pixley, Allensworth, and Kern NWR but high property values make additional acquisitions impossible. Jihadda is also focusing on “people management” at AI – signs, protective fencing, etc. to improve the public's experience. UC Merced is very interested in establishing a field station at AI; they need money for an endowment, but this is high on their priority list.

Kathy recently attended a workshop hosted by the Governor's office of planning and research – they were very interested in BLM's partnership with the Alpaugh school; *Kathy will connect Steve and Jihadda with the OPR people.*

- vi. *Elizabeth Palmer – NRCS:* The Wetlands Reserve Program is now the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) – new acronyms but no real changes to the program. ACEP is a program to help restore riparian systems, seasonal wetlands and vernal pool grazing lands. Open sign up is until May 15. There are only 2 changes to note: NRCS no longer has restoration-only easements, and owners only need to have owned the land for 2 years instead of the former 7 years. Funding caps have increased with increasing land value. For more information see: <http://www.tularebasinwatershed.org/latest-news/2014-conservation-easement-applications-wetlands-due-may-15>

NRCS is also running the silage delay program, working with dairymen on a voluntary basis to delay harvest until tricolor blackbirds have fledged. There has been some consideration of “banking” silage and offering it to landowners to compensate for losses due to delay, but this model is logistically inconvenient and NRCS doesn't have the funding or the initiative to do this – they'd need a 3rd party. *Maybe Sustainable Conservation?*

- vii. *Sarah Campe, Carole Combs, Kathy Wood McLaughlin – TBWP/TBWI*
- *Watershed Connections:* In February, Sarah coordinated the first “Watershed Connections” meeting – an effort to initiate watershed/landscape scale coordination and project planning, with an emphasis on connecting upper watershed managers with lower watershed consumers. This meeting was used to identify priority, watershed-level issues, identify which groups already working on what issues and introduce research connecting upper watershed management with downstream

water yield and quality. Sarah then submitted and had accepted an application for professional facilitation services for a one-day Watershed Connections workshop on June 10 at Southern California Edison's Environmental and Education Center in Tulare. The TBWP will follow up with more information soon.

- *TBWI projects/Watershed Coordinator extension:*
 - Kathy reported that the Library Ranch feasibility study has been put temporarily on hold.
 - The TBWP received DOC drought funding to extend the Watershed Coordinator position for 6 months – to be split between Kathy and Dave Clendenen. Kathy will be stepping back, but remaining involved. The TBWP continues to seek funding to continue the work beyond the DOC extension.
 - Re Tulare Basin IRWMs: Poso Creek is finishing its plan update; they need feedback on the wildlife and habitat sections. It should go public in about 30 days. All of the IRWMs are moving quickly in order to get implementation funding for drought mitigation work.
 - The Westside RCD recently lost funding from Westlands Water District; Kathy continues to work with them along with Sarge Green (CWI) and BLM.

- viii. *Dave Clendenen – Vollmar Natural Lands Consulting:* Vollmar is a for-profit consulting firm that has been hit hard by the drought. Many of the winter contracts were associated with vernal pool ecology, but there are no vernal pools this year. They are doing biological assessments for California Rangeland Coalition ranches to show that the resources are there to justify an easement. They also have a contract with High Speed Rail to do vernal pool and riparian restoration. Dave's focus is on conservation opportunities for upland habitat – right now he is contacting landowners to find willing sellers. Dave will also be co-Watershed Coordinator with Kathy for 6 months beginning in May, funded through a DOC drought-relief, watershed coordinator-extension program.

- ix. *Bill Moffat – CA State Parks:* The water table at the Tule Elk reserve dropped from 140 feet to 300 feet earlier this year. The Reserve pumps with solar pumps that run continuously and irrigate a 15-acre area with small ponds for natural forage for the elk. They've started feeding year-round because it's been so dry. They want to increase use and are working on improving a picnic area – they new facilities should be ready within the year. Bill is also working on finding ways to get more water and improve habitat. The Reserve will host the Bed and Bugle campout the first week in October.

- x. *Nick Stanley, Scott Frazer – US FWS/Kern NWR:* Nick led a tour of Kern NWR. Only about 40% of the wetlands are flooded this year and they anticipate next year will be worse. Other groups are tracking waterfowl populations regionally to gauge population fluctuations vs. local changes in population.

- xi. *Larry Saslaw – San Joaquin Valley Recovery Team:* Upland species populations are crashing – mostly related to a lack of food/lack of germination of annual plants. The small mammal population drop is also affecting raptors. On the other hand, for groups looking to do projects, this is a good time since there will be fewer problems with individual species – the number of animals on a particular footprint is really low.

For more information on environmental water and the drought, please visit the TBWP webpage: <http://www.tularebasinwildlifepartners.org/tulare-basin-working-group.html>