

**Yolo Natural Heritage Program
Steering Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
March 23, 2009**

Action Items

- Send out revised and corrected meeting schedule (SAC and WG).
- Arrange presentation from BDCP.
- Send out a draft outline for the Conservation Strategy chapter to the SAC.
- Send out a draft outline of the Goals and Objectives section.

Summary

1. Call Meeting to Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:05 p.m. by John Hopkins

2. Introductions and Welcome

All those present introduced themselves.

Attendees:

Steering Committee Members

Keith Fichtner, Development
Vinton Hawkins, Sierra Holdings
Glen Holstein, CNPS/Tuleyome
John Hopkins, Institute for Ecological Health
Yvonne LeMaitre, Wild Oak Farms
Stefan Lorenzato, Yolo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District
Chad Roberts, Yolo Audubon

JPA Member Agency Staff and Liaisons

Sandra White, City of West Sacramento

JPA Staff

Maria Wong, Executive Director
Susan Garbini, Student Intern
Dan Airola, Airola Environmental Consulting
Jim Estep, Estep Environmental Consulting

Interested Parties

Allan Hollander, UC Davis
George Phillips, Conaway Ranch
Jim Quinn, UC Davis

3. Approval of agenda order

It was agreed upon to skip item #4 (approval of 1-26-09 and 2-23-09 meeting summaries) because some members did not have a chance to read it prior to the meeting.

4. Meeting Summaries and Action Items

The meeting summaries will be submitted for approval at the next meeting.

Action Items

- The Biological and the Ag-Habitat Interface Working Groups have met and have set their schedules for regular meetings through June 2009 (see item #7).
 - Future SAC meetings are scheduled through June
 - Schedule for completion of the draft plan is in preparation
 - A presentation on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan is tentatively scheduled for the SAC meeting on April 13.
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5. **Presentation:** “The Influence of Vegetation Structure on Swainson’s Hawk (*Buteo swainsonii*) Foraging Habitat Suitability in Yolo County, California” – Jim Estep, Estep Environmental Consulting [See ppt]

This is an update of the Baseline Swainson’s Hawk report of 2007. Swainson’s hawk is an agriculture-dependent species and the focus of the report is to discuss the components of Yolo County agriculture that make suitable habitat for this species. Particularly important is how crops are used in the breeding regime. Swainson’s Hawk is numerous in the lowland areas of Yolo County. We have good coverage and feel confident that the data are a reasonably good representation of the extent of the population in Yolo County.

The issues:

- Ag land use pattern associated with the population of Swainson’s Hawk – certain ag types and cropping patterns are beneficial
- How do we manage the ag landscape to help sustain the Swainson’s Hawk and other agricultural land-dependent populations?
- Each ag cover type has a different value to foraging Swainson’s Hawks
- The landscape changes seasonally and annually.

Yolo County is a relatively diverse and dynamic agricultural landscape compared to other areas of the Central Valley. It contains large foraging ranges that fluctuate in size and configuration in response to changes in the dynamic agricultural landscape. How can we control the landscape and obtain some certainty for the future about maintaining suitable habitat?

Requirements for foraging habitat suitability:

- Prey availability
- Prey accessibility
- Proximity to nesting habitat
- Patch size

The determinant of prey availability and accessibility is dependent on the extent of vegetation cover, including height of vegetation.

The method of the study entailed examining 18 fields, with 13 different cover types, and correlating them with seasonal patterns of bird appearance and crop regimes. The following crops were included (number of fields for each crop in parentheses):

- Wheat (2)
- Tomatoes (2)
- Alfalfa (2)
- Vineyard
- Irrigated pasture
- Dry pasture
- Idle fields
- Corn
- Safflower
- Peppers
- Other annual grass

The best crops for Swainson's Hawk habitat are alfalfa and hay crops, with a high population of voles, which is a favorite prey. The distance from a next tree is also related to crop patterns. Idle fields are good – with low plant cover – enabling them to see prey. Irrigation and mowing affect these parameters. The detectability of prey decreases with the height of vegetation and/or cover. A diverse cover type matrix is ok as long as there is high-value habitat available every year.

We are developing a rating system for combined crops to determine their relative ranking and a minimum threshold. It is possible to establish numerical values to capture these values. The matrix captures other components of the system. Research is relevant to understanding crop value for other species of concern as well...

See fig. 22 in ppt presentation for “seasonal suitability of selected ag cover types”.

Discussion

Question: Are dietary demands constant during the year?

Response: They tend to fatten up in the period immediately preceding migration. Males need to bring lots of food to the female and young early in the season.

6. **Staff Presentation:** Status report and discussion regarding vegetation classifications, planning unit boundaries, and update on Ag-Habitat valuation process – Dan Airola, YNHP consultant team [See ppt]

The Vegetation Classification System is being developed to determine what vegetation and land cover types provide environmental services. We are starting to get the “building blocks” in place. The goal is to think about what kind of habitat mix will benefit the county so that we can set planning unit boundaries and develop a consistent set of land units. This is the approved approach to conservation strategy for working landscapes, discussed with the

Fish & Wildlife Service and the Department of Fish & Game. The goal is to rank ag value for species use, and show how ag is compatible with wildlife conservation objectives.

There are at present a number of “process steps” for the conservation strategy (see ppt):

- Calculate the acres of ag land
- Determine what species use which crops
- Determine the habitat values of each ag type
- Provide a “common currency” for assessing different combinations of crops
- Calculate “habitat units (HEP)
- This process will lead to species crop value and a ranking process.

The initial reaction to this approach from the FWS was that they needed to be educated about the ag component. Now there are a lot of participants in our briefings. We expect to have results from the first run of the ag model by the end of April.

Discussion

The strong interest of the agency in these issues may not be positive – there tends to be a bias against viewing croplands as habitat.

Field trips will be organized with wildlife agencies (by invitation only) – including a pollinator study sponsored by the Xerces Society – to demonstrate what is working on the pollinator side in agriculture, as well as to show them bird habitat in farmland settings.

Question: If the matrix starts changing, how can there be incentives to maintain a habitat-friendly matrix?

Response: We need to obtain a better understanding of how the ag mix is likely to change in the future and predict the effects on habitat values. Our economist consultant, David Sunding, is working on a model of change over time, taking into account market forces and patterns of crop types.

UC Davis is involved in research on the value of ecosystem services and can contribute to better understanding and improved data on these issues.

What about rangelands? Dynamic models for “uplands” need to address the likelihood of changes in rangelands in relation to habitat values.

Status and Schedule

Lots of tasks for the report are moving forward in tandem. We need to decide how to present the information and report sections to the SAC. By next meeting, we will have an outline of how information will be presented to the SAC over the next 3-4 months.

Question: it is important that the committee have outlines before sections are written as we discussed previously. It sounds like we might see draft sections and not outlines? Another concern is that the information and sections will show up in an avalanche. It is better to feed the material to us slowly so that we can digest it and have the chance to discuss.

Response: All of these steps are interconnected. The committee will see a draft outline for the Conservation Strategy chapter – the goals and objectives outlines will also be ready soon and will be sent out before the meeting.

One of the tasks of the Working Groups is to review and comment on draft sections that are applicable to their area of focus.

7. Working Group Updates

- *Biological Working Group*

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The biological working group met on March 11 and went over the draft list of covered species with Dan Airola. Working Group members did not review responses to comments other than their own. Members want to see revised maps that were commented on and have not yet been prepared. Comments were on consultant team responses for invertebrates.

The Biological Working Group recommends added the following three species to the list of Covered Species:

- **San Joaquin pocket mouse** (*Perognathus inornatus*).
- **Heartscale** (*Atriplex cordulata*)
- **Vernal pool smallscale** (*Atriplex persistens*).

The group is interested in species to be used to define assembly roles for preserve areas.

They will meet on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. in the Small Conference Room at the Davis Branch of the Yolo County Library or at the Conference Room at CDFG Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area Headquarters on Chiles Road in Davis. Their meeting scheduled for March 25 has been cancelled. They will meet next on April 8.

- *Agricultural Habitat Interface Working Group*

The Agricultural Habitat Interface Working Group met on March 18 and conducted a brief discussion of the concept of “covered actions” or “covered activities” for purposes of the habitat conservation plan. They then developed a set of lists for agricultural activities, operations, and lands. This list is preliminary and will be consolidated by the Working Group at future meetings and by the consultants in order to eliminate duplications – both internally and with other sections of the HCP.

The Ag Working Group will meet regularly on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of each month from 3:30 – 5:00 p.m. at the Conference Room in the Department of Parks and Resources, 120 W. Main St., Suite C, Woodland. The next meeting of the Ag Interface Working Group will be held on Wednesday, April 1, 2009.

- *Urban Habitat Interface Working Group*

The Urban Habitat interface Working Group met on February 9. They were sent lists of potential “Covered Activities” --- planned projects for each City and the County (including rural areas) for inclusion in the Yolo Natural Heritage Program habitat conservation plan.

These lists were developed from various websites, including SACOG MTP 2035, Yolo County Draft 2030 General Plan, and various City plans. We would like review and feedback as follows:

1. Additions that may have been missed in our research
2. Deletions (if they are definitely eliminated from future plans)
3. Contact information for obtaining additional geographic information as needed
4. Revised descriptions if applicable

This working group will meet on an as-needed basis.

“Covered Activities” will also be coordinated with the BDCP.

8. Public Comment

A comment was made about the potential long-term negative impacts of individual units, subdivisions, and ranchette developments in agricultural areas. Is anybody studying the long-term potential impacts? SACOG? UCD?

A comment was made that there is research at the UC Davis Information Center for the Environment (ICE) on this topic, with a test example focused on Yolo County, as part of the Rural Urban Connector Study. Guest Alan Hollander is involved in this research and could provide numbers on these matters.

9. Announcements and Updates

Maria reported that the JPA Board approved sending two letters regarding Delta Issues to Sen. Wolk and other California Representatives in the U.S. Congress. These letters raise concerns about BDCP overlapping with Yolo County areas in habitat planning. Also the issue of governance needs to be addressed.

The process for RFQ (Request for Quote) for the EIR/EIS review of our plan has been initiated. A request for a “Notice of Intent” be sent to the FWS soon and that will start the process. This involves developing a formal plan for public comment on the Draft HCP. The Draft EIR/EIS needs to be ready at the same time as the actual draft report in order to avoid delays.

10. Summary and Next Steps

The next meeting of the Advisory Committee will be held on Monday, April 13, 2009, at 6:00 p.m., in the Atrium Training Room, Yolo County Administration Building, 625 Court St., Woodland. A presentation by the BDCP director is tentatively scheduled for that meeting.

12. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 5:55 pm.