

Revised Yolo NHP Land Area Classification for Planning Purposes – Preliminary Discussion Draft

Dan Airola, June 9, 2010

The terminology and structure of Yolo Natural Heritage Program's (NHP) approach to designating Landscape Units for planning purposes was recently commented upon by the NHP Steering and Advisory Committee (SAC) and by permitting agencies. This discussion presents a proposed modified approach to designating Landscape Units, based on a recent discussion with the SAC's Biological Working Group (BWG).

As background, four Landscape Units (Uplands, Riparian, Valley Natural Communities, and Agriculture) were initially identified as a planning tool to group lands with broadly similar characteristics, to allow efficient presentation of plan management direction. During reviews of conservation strategies, some SAC members and agencies expressed concern that the names of Landscape Units (especially the *Upland Landscape Unit*) were confusing. Another concern was that the Landscape Units were not sufficiently defined on a geographically consistent basis (i.e., a portion of the Riparian Landscape Unit occurred within a geographic area that otherwise was included within the Upland Landscape Unit). Other SAC members, however, considered the functionally-based landscape unit designations useful for planning purposes.

The SAC requested that the BWG meet to review the structure and names of the Landscape Units and make recommendations back to the group. The proposed modified Landscape Unit designation ties geographically to the YNP planning units as follows: and associated habitat subunits are based on this discussion, but with some expanded development.

Hill and Ridge Landscape Unit (Planning Units 1-6, 8)

Chaparral

Oak Woodland

Grassland

Riparian (all area riparian habitat, including upper portions of Cache Creek and Putah Creek)

Agriculture (includes Capay Valley and dryland and vineyards in hills)

Valley Landscape Unit (Planning Units 7, 9-21)

Riparian (All area riparian, including lowland portions of Cache and Putah Creeks)

Emergent Wetland

Alkali Sink

Vernal Pool Grassland

Grassland

Oak Woodland (mainly scattered valley oak)

Agriculture

Pasture

Grain

Field Crops

Rice

Orchard and Vineyard

Developed Lands

The modified system simplifies the Landscape Unit designation between lands by separating the two dominant landform types in the County: elevated topography and lowland areas. It retains the two landscape unit designations because conditions and conservation needs for certain natural communities and habitats (oak woodland, grassland, riparian) and agriculture differ substantially between these two areas.

The revised approach replaces the term *Uplands* with the more descriptive name *Hill and Ridge*. It also incorporates riparian habitat within Planning Units 1 through 5 into the Hill and Ridge Landscape Unit, thereby consolidating all lands in these units. It also incorporates upper Cache Creek (Planning Unit 6) with its associated riparian habitat and specialized agriculture, and the upper portion of Putah Creek (Planning Unit 8) that occurs within steeper terrain.

The Valley Landscape Unit incorporates all lands in the other lowland planning units, including lands occupied by agriculture, lowland riparian habitat, remnant upland habitats, and developed areas. Conservation measures will be described separately for each of these different communities within the Valley Landscape Unit.

The separation of the landscape units requires care to ensure that conservation strategies for the two areas are closely linked, especially in treatment of riparian habitats, to ensure that necessary connections are provided.

Proposed Modified Conservation Lands Classification for Yolo NHP Lands

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The Yolo Natural Heritage Program's (NHP) Conservation Plan requires a classification of lands that reflects their current and proposed future conservation status. Key conservation information to be conveyed through a conservation land classification system is:

- the degree of protection of lands, and
- the extent to which habitat is managed or enhanced to achieve natural community and covered species goals.

To date, the NHP has used a conservation land classification that recognized three Resource Management System (RMS) classes. This classification has been criticized for combining lands with different amounts of land protection and conservation management. The revised conservation lands classification system (Table 1) more finely segregates the status of current and future lands in the plan area.

Land Protection

The proposed revised conservation land classification system recognizes five general land conservation categories, based on the certainty of land protection. All lands in the planning area can be assigned to one of these five major categories.

Category 1 lands achieve the highest conservation protection, through use of irrevocable conservation easements or other permanent protection mechanisms.

Category 2 lands are protected by administrative actions taken by a government agency (i.e., adoption of a land use plan) that emphasizes conservation.

Category 3 lands represent a protection strategy that may be identified under the conservation plan, which would temporarily require certain land uses (especially the growing of certain crops) in order to meet conservation goals and objectives for covered species.

Category 4 lands are lands that are not currently protected nor intended to be protected through the conservation strategy, but also are not scheduled to be modified by covered activities. Thus, they are not conserved, but are expected to retain some level of habitat value. Most agricultural lands, for example, would occur in this category.

Category 5 lands are those that are already developed or scheduled to be developed under the plan's covered activities.

Conservation Management

Two subcategories (a, b) are recognized within Conservation Land Categories 1, 2 and 3, based on the level of management intensity to be applied. Category 1a, 1b, and 1c lands would be actively managed at a high level of habitat value, which often would require enhancement from typical conditions. For example, Category 1a agricultural lands could be enhanced through retention or creation of herbaceous edge habitats to encourage covered species and their prey. Similarly, within the Hill and Ridge Landscape Unit, some grassland areas would be protected and enhanced to encourage prey species used by raptors and burrow habitat required by burrowing owls and the California tiger salamander.

Category 1b, 2b, and 3b lands would be conserved in their typical form of land use, without requirements for enhancement. Protection would prevent conversion of habitat to other uses (i.e., conversion of agricultural lands to developed use), but would not require enhancement measures inherent in Category 1a, 2a, and 3a lands.

In short, the proposed conservation land classification will provide a meaningful display of the acreage and distribution of lands with different conservation characteristics, to allow careful assessment of covered species and community values, and the achievement of conservation goals and objectives.

Table 1. Draft Land Conservation Land Classification System for Use in Yolo Natural Heritage Program

Land Protection Status	Habitat Management Emphasis		
	Managed for Ecological Values	Managed to Maintain Existing Conditions	No Active Effort to Maintain Habitat Conditions
Irrevocable easement	Category 1a – Standard Conservation Easement with habitat enhancement emphasis (<i>Swainson’s hawk mitigation easements, Mitigation bank lands</i>)	Category 1b – Lands with conservation easements without enhancement emphasis (<i>Agricultural land preservation easements: Yolo Land Trust, etc.</i>)	
Administrative protection	Category 2a – Federal and state lands with conservation emphasis (<i>BLM, DFG conservation areas</i>)	Category 2b – Fed and State lands without conservation emphasis (<i>DWR flood easement lands</i>)	
Temporary protection	Category 3a – Lands (primarily cultivated agricultural) that would be enhanced temporarily to achieve conservation goals (<i>proposed future conservation measure</i>)	Category 3b – Cultivated agricultural lands for which crops are grown under standard conditions temporarily, to meet conservation goals (<i>proposed future conservation measure</i>)	
Unprotected	N/A		Category 4 – General lands with habitat value that are not managed specifically for ecological purposes, but for which no covered activities are proposed
Development lands			Category 5 – existing developed lands and lands proposed for development under covered activities.
USFWS-required mitigation lands			
General conserved lands			
Non-conserved Lands			