

**Yolo Natural Heritage Program
Steering Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
June 28, 2010**

Note: "The policy in preparing meeting summaries is to produce a record of discussion by all participants. Statements do not necessarily reflect the views of the YNHP Steering Advisory Committee or the JPA Board of Directors."

Action Items

- *Send out (and post) schedule of SAC meetings through December 2010*
- *Confirm access to articles by interested public at the UCD library.*
- *Explain why the agricultural habitat suitability rating system is not applicable to non-agricultural habitat.*
- *Provide justification for why we are basing strategies for agricultural lands on habitat unit values.*
- *Post the Ag Forecasting Presentation on the Agricultural Portal on the YNHP website (from the "Seventh Annual Habitat Conservation Planning from Tahoe to the Bay Workshop" held in Vacaville on November 18th 2009)*
- *Ask the Yolo County Farm Bureau to review the Agricultural Forecasting model.*

MEETING SUMMARY

1. Call Meeting to Order

The meeting was called to order at 5:03 p.m. by Yolo Natural Heritage Program Steering Advisory Committee Co-Chair, John Hopkins.

2. Introductions and Welcome

All those present introduced themselves.

Attendees:

Steering Committee Members

Jim Baxter, Davis resident/CSUS

Keith Fichtner, Developer

Steve Greco, UC Davis

John Hopkins, Institute for Ecological Health

Yvonne LeMaitre, Yolo County Farm Bureau

Stefan Lorenzato, Yolo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District

Jeannette Wrynski, Yolo RCD

Denise Sagara, Yolo Farm Bureau

JPA Member Agency Staff and Liaisons

Chris Lee, Yolo County Board of Supervisors

Sandra White, City of West Sacramento

JPA Staff

Maria Wong, Executive Director

Kate Montieth, Assistant to the Director

Susan Garbini, Graduate Fellow
Dan Airola, Airola Environmental Consulting
Pete Rawlings, SAIC

Interested Parties

Marc Hoshovsky, Davis resident
Charles Tyson, Yolo County landowner
Kathryn Tyson, Yolo County landowner

3. Approval of agenda order

The order of the agenda was approved.

4. Meeting Summary and Action Items

The draft meeting summary for the SAC meeting on June 14 was approved with no changes.

Action Items

- *Prepare a schedule with all meeting information to SAC members.*
See item 5 below.
- *Post Agricultural Working Group information and reports on the YNHP website.*
An "Agricultural Portal" has been created on the YNHP home page (left side). All relevant AG Working Group documents and reports will be posted there.
- *Arrange for 2 articles by Steve Greco to be publicly available in keeping with the requirements of the Brown Act.*
It was determined that the public can access articles on line at the UCD library (in person) without a UCD "login" ID. This will be tested before the next meeting to ensure that it is possible. A suggested list of articles will be prepared and updated as appropriate for SAC members.

5. Review revised SAC agenda schedule, including recommended sequence of discussion topics through December 2010

A schedule of meetings with topics and location through December 2010 has been prepared based on the discussion and approval from SAC members at the last meeting. It will be mailed to SAC members tomorrow and posted on the YNHP web page.

6. Presentation and discussion regarding the draft Agricultural Conservation Strategy proposal

Dan Airola and Pete Rawlings, SAIC

This presentation conveys an overview and framework of the proposed agricultural conservation strategy for the YNHP plan. Details will be added as the strategy is further developed. The strategy is summarized in the PowerPoint presentation provided at the meeting, which is available from the YNHP Events Calendar for this meeting date.

The agricultural lands conservation strategy encompasses lands included in both the Valley and the Hill and Ridge landscape units. Its focus is on the covered species and species of local concern that occur in agricultural lands in Yolo County. The strategy incorporates information on the habitat suitability of various crops based on assigned habitat value ratings for these species,

Habitat value ratings involve a per-acre rating of habitats for various species' different uses (i.e., foraging, nesting habitat). The ratings are based on available information from the literature and local experts. The per-acre ratings are multiplied by the number of acres of each crop, and the products are summed to provide an overall measure of habitat value provided to covered species. This approach is commonly used in large scale conservation planning and can be updated adaptively over the life of the plan, based on monitoring results and new research findings and has been reviewed by the wildlife agencies.

Comments on PowerPoint Slide 3:

1. Please put a "0" in the blank cells.
2. Add "foraging" to the table heading
3. Why weren't natural communities similarly rated, e.g., using the (California Wildlife Habitat Relationships) system?

Response: We addressed non-agricultural habitats by modeling habitat as suitable or unsuitable, consistent with most other HCPs. We added more detailed ratings of agricultural lands because their values to species are more varied (i.e., many low value crops) and because the acreages of various crops with different values are highly dynamic. Upland habitats are less variable in characteristics and suitability and less likely to vary over time. Thus, the additional detail on crop suitability is specific to the dynamic nature of agriculture. We will review this question and try to provide a more comprehensive response later.

Question: Regarding the topical sentence: "Agricultural strategies based on habitat unit values...", please provide justification for why we are taking this approach in agricultural lands?

Response: We will schedule an in-depth presentation on the agricultural forecasting model for those who are interested in understanding the origin and details of the agricultural conservation strategy. A presentation on the "Agricultural Forecasting Analysis" was given to the SAC on August 10, 2009, and can be found in the "Agricultural Portal" on our website (and in the meeting materials for that date on the Events Calendar). Another presentation on the model, by JPA consultant David Sunding (Berkeley Economic Consulting), given at the *Seventh Annual Habitat Conservation Planning Workshop from Tahoe to the Bay* (11/18, 2009), is also available on the YNHP website Agricultural Portal

Question: Some of the descriptions and ratings don't make sense based on "real-world" anecdotal observations. How can the plan respond to questions raised during implementation based on experience? This is important for the long-term success of the plan.

Response: If, in the future, we observe different conditions from those described in the plan, the implementing agency could adjust the "mix" of strategies; however, the objectives would remain the same as in the original plan. The implementing entity will have a system for receiving and evaluating comments on plan components -- the adaptive management process -- which is intended to address these issues of change. This will be described and discussed at the next SAC meeting.

The numbers in the model (acres, habitat unit value, etc.) reflect a relative scale, not an absolute value. Professional judgments vary and are subject to revision. This all feeds into the adaptive management strategy.

PRESENTATION (cont'd)

Following are steps that will be used in determining habitat objectives for covered species within agricultural lands.

- Assign overall conservation objectives for species (% of existing habitat to conserve)
- Develop conservation strategy for natural communities (i.e., non-agricultural lands)
- Assess the proportion of covered species objectives achieved within natural communities
- By subtraction, calculate the remaining amount of habitat value that needs to be provided within agricultural lands to meet species objectives

Therefore, we first determine the ability to achieve conservation objectives through conservation of natural lands. Then, when needed to meet species objectives, we will look at the potential for agricultural land to provide habitat. For some species (e.g. Swainson's hawk foraging habitat), agricultural lands are important, and thus meeting species needs requires maintenance of agricultural uses. The strategy is not about converting agricultural lands to non-agricultural habitats.

The Agricultural Forecasting Model was previously presented to the SAC in detail. The model:

- Assembles recent data on crop patterns and constraints to agricultural use (soils, water, transportation, etc.)
- Models probability of crop choices in the future on a field-by-field level
- Applies the covered species' habitat valuation model
- Predicts the likelihood in future years of achieving the portion of each covered species' target that is assigned to agricultural lands

Comment: It would be a good idea for the Yolo County Farm Bureau to review the model to see if it incorporates understanding of the "real-world" aspects of agriculture. For example, the price of alfalfa is crashing on the world market, and may lead farmers to switch to other crops, which might have serious implications for our plan.

Response: We have continuously involved the agricultural community, but are happy to do further outreach, particularly as the specifics of the strategy are developed.

Question: If you use high value habitat, the crucial issues are energetics and geographic stressors that will affect feeding and fledging rates. Calibration and validation aspects of the model will be crucial to ascertaining certainty. Confidence in the model will be critical.

Response: The model provides the ability to look ahead at a set of policy problems and formulate potential solutions for a variety of possible futures. The Agricultural forecasting model is not just a planning tool, but also a tool for the implementing the plan. A benefit is that it allows for mixing and matching agricultural lands with natural lands as habitats. We can demonstrate to the agencies that we have a tool to assess alternative agricultural conditions in changing

markets. The model shows the degree to which species can use different crops for the same purposes, and thus how resilient the system is in providing habitat needs. It is a predictive tool that allows advance planning for any changes in crop patterns that might be detrimental to species. Finally, it shows the costs for modifying crop practices (i.e., what farmers would need to be paid switch from one crop to another, and what are the likely areas where such action may be needed or is most likely to be feasible.

Comment: The linkage between the forecasting model and execution of a strategy is missing in the strategy write-up

Response: We will add more specific information in the next iteration.

The goals and objectives for the agricultural lands conservation strategy link to and complement the overall conservation goals of the plan:

Goals:

- Identify mixtures of agricultural uses that are beneficial to covered species and other native species, recognizing the dynamic nature of the agricultural landscape;
- Ensure that the future mixture of agricultural uses supports covered species and other native species and a vibrant agricultural economy;
- Create incentives for the agricultural community to manage their lands in a manner that benefits covered species and other native species.

Objectives:

- Maintain and apply a system for tracking and predicting future acreages of various agricultural crops and the resulting habitat values provided for covered species;
- Maintain the conservation values for covered species (measured in habitat units) allocated to agricultural lands.

Conservation Measure 1. Mitigate for Effects of Habitat Loss Resulting from Permanent Loss of Agricultural Lands.

Permanent losses of agricultural lands will be mitigated in the traditional form of acquisition and enhancement of similar habitats to offset habitat value loss. We are considering various ways of structuring the determination of mitigation requirements, including a more detailed assignment of ratios based on relative values lost and conserved (see PowerPoint, slide 7)

Comment: This is too complicated a system. If the land is developed, what would the baseline be? Crops are constantly rotated, which creates difficulty in defining the baseline condition for mitigation. A simple single ratio for loss of agricultural lands is needed.

Comment: When class 1 agricultural soils are lost, replacing them with Dunnigan Hills will not pass muster. There must be comparable mitigation in terms of agricultural habitat potential. There has to be a system to maintain habitat *quality* – there needs to be some kind of tiering system. A crop-based approach doesn't fit in with the need for maintaining habitat.

Response: It is the habitat value that must be retained.

Comment: It appears that everything has been aggregated countywide, and that mitigation is not delineated by specific land area.

Response: We can select lands that contribute to habitat value for mitigation, and specify the land areas within which mitigation should occur. These needs, however, may change over the life of the plan. The plan is intended to maintain a sufficient mosaic of habitat value on lands throughout the county to meet species needs – not to ensure that habitat will be provided in the same place each year. Disappearance of an important component of the crop/habitat mix would raise a large concern. The question is whether it is appropriate to use the entire county as the mosaic or whether it is necessary to refine the definition of the mosaic in terms of associated habitat requirements (e.g. geographic proximity to certain critical areas). The strategy doesn't have to be site specific. Various strategies in different planning areas within the county will be based on different thresholds. The plan is not necessarily crop specific. It may be possible to achieve the same net benefit from a different mix of species.

Question: Is there an aggregated habitat value assigned for all species?

Comment: Ratings are not based on aggregated habitat values. Certain species, however, will drive the strategy; others will be carried along with them. For example, the Swainson's Hawk has a high requirement for agricultural lands, so meeting its need is likely to meet the needs of other raptors that use similar habitats.

Response: Mitigation for loss of agricultural land may be required by CEQA as well as for loss of habitat. The management strategy will also affect the habitat value of agricultural lands.

PRESENTATION (cont'd)

Conservation Measure 2. Monitor Agricultural Habitat Values for Covered Species and Implement Actions as Needed to Meet Conservation Objectives

This process involves

- Monitoring crop acreages and habitat values vs. goals
- Forecasting future changes in crop acres and habitat values
- If forecasts predict declines to below habitat value target, providing incentives to achieve goals

Mechanisms to achieve covered species targets in agricultural lands include evaluating different incentives vis-à-vis landowners' interests and willingness to participate in a conservation strategy. We need a "tool box" that can provide guidance and help achieve common objectives with other partners (e.g. RCD, NRCS).

- Approaches for enhancing value:
 - Encourage growth of desirable crops
 - Increase habitat value of crops (incorporate habitat elements, etc.)

- Options for providing incentives:
 - Short-term or permanent easements
 - Incentive payments
 - Property tax reductions
 - grants

A strategy for deploying incentives will have to be developed. Flexibility will be required to enable changes in strategies as needed.

Conservation Measure 3. Coordinate with Ongoing Efforts to Enhance Agricultural Lands as Habitat.

The plan needs to be developed and implemented in coordination with ongoing and future conservation measures by government entities, non-profit, and private interests.

Comment (sent via e-mail): Replace "riparian" with the phrase "aquatic and associated riparian areas" as the descriptor. The concept of "riparian habitat" is still problematic, since "riparian" habitat in many parts of the county is/will be shrubby at best and often only herbaceous, while still being "riparian" (submitted by SAC member, Chad Roberts, June 28, 2010)

Response: A broad definition for the term "Riparian" has been adopted by the SAC, and this definition was intended here. We will attempt to ensure that the full variety of aquatic and riparian habitats will be conserved.

It was agreed to move forward with the draft agricultural conservation strategy in the general framework presented here, but with more detail in the future.

7. Working Group Reports

- *Biological Working Group:* The Biological Working Group will schedule meetings to complete a list of tasks. They prepared the lists of species that were presented to the SAC at the last meeting and which will be sent to the agencies for endorsements. They continue to examine the concepts of "matrix" and "corridors" for the plan. A wetland and riparian strategy, is under review and they will continue to monitor other the actions of other agencies in this area that affect the plan.
- *Agriculture Habitat Interface Working Group:* The Ag Working met regularly from February through April 2010 and completed an examination of a set of issues with agricultural content relevant to the YNHP plan which was presented at the last SAC meeting. They are on hiatus for now.
- *Urban Interface Working Group:* The Urban Interface WG is awaiting the appropriate time to discuss governance and implementation issues for the plan, along with covered activities.

8. Public Comment

Franklin's Bumblebee may be coming to Yolo County. An update on this will be provided as more information is available.

9. Announcements and Updates

The Flood District closed solicitations for bids on the Capay Dam repair.

An environmental document is out for review on the West Sacramento Levee Project. This concerns the US Army Corps of Engineers policy "no trees on levees". The deadline for

comment is July 12. This policy could lead to the loss of riparian habitat along the Sacramento River and is an important issue for our plan. The JPA will send comments.

10. Summary and Next Steps

- The next meeting will focus on the Presentation and review of the adaptive management plan (section of Chapter 5, *Conservation Strategy*).

11. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:10 pm. The next meeting will be held on Monday, July 12, at 5:00 pm.