

TULARE BASIN WILDLIFE PARTNERS CURRENT PRIORITIES FOR TULARE LAKE BASIN REGIONAL PLANNING

Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners (TBWP) — a locally driven NGO, advocacy and leadership group created by the Tulare Lake Basin Working Group in March-May 2005 — is assisting major public and private partners (CA DF&G, USFWS, BLM, USDA/NRCS Wetland Reserve Program, CA State Parks, Tulare Basin Wetlands Association, Central Valley Joint Venture and other local and regional partners) by developing resources needed for protection and restoration of natural communities in the Southern San Joaquin Valley – Tulare Lake Basin. It aims to do this in a manner than compliments agricultural productivity and expands the economy of the Southern San Joaquin Valley. A high priority in 2006 is completion of Tulare Lake Basin regional conservation planning, focusing on the Goose Lake, Sand Ridge – Tulare Lake, and Buena Vista Lake areas. The TBWP also seeks to provide immediate improvements to the limited water supplies available to existing private wetland owners in the Tulare Basin.

The overall acreage involved in the regional planning area (the greater Tulare Lake vicinity hydrological unit in parts of Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern Counties) is 630,000 – of which 31,000 acres are in federal ownership, 10,000 acres are in state ownership, 16,000 acres are in private conservation organization ownership (including private duck clubs) and 557,000 are in private (agricultural or other) ownership.

This planning effort seeks to facilitate collaboration among many landowners to provide flood control, improve water supplies, protect water quality, enrich quality of life, increase recreation opportunities, enhance and restore wildlife habitat and secure the agricultural legacy of the area.

Restoration and protection will be designed to create linkages and corridors along existing floodplains and will blend upland and wetland habitats, protecting seven threatened and endangered species (including blunt-nosed leopard lizard, Tipton kangaroo rat, and San Joaquin kit fox) and more than 60 other special status species (species of special concern). As envisioned, the total protected acreage (federal, state, and private) of the completed Goose Lake, Sand Ridge – Tulare Lake, and Buena Vista Lake areas would surpass that of the Grassland Ecological Area in the San Joaquin Valley, would yield even greater statewide benefit to T & E species and the local economy, and would restore the Tulare Basin to its historic prominence as home to the most extensive wetlands in California's Central Valley.

The Goose Lake area of north-central Kern County contains the largest remaining block of undeveloped land on the San Joaquin Valley floor (approximately 90,000 acres). This extensive land base provides an unparalleled opportunity for protection of remaining open space resources

including: habitat protection for over 60 special status species which are tracked by the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB), expansion of three existing CA DF&G Ecological Reserves, and restoration of upland habitat for wildlife corridors between these Reserves. Other potential components of this project include the protection of 10,000 acres of privately managed wetlands and the restoration of 25,000 acres of wetlands on marginal farmland (including the possibility of a new CA DF&G Wildlife Management Area), as well as private wetlands managed under conservation easements and an enlarged Kern National Wildlife Refuge.

The Sand Ridge – Tulare Lake focus area consists of approximately 5,500 acres of important threatened and endangered species habitat (a mosaic of saltbrush scrub, iodine sink scrub, alkali grassland, and dune communities) and presents unique protection opportunities along the southern edge of the Tulare Lake Basin. The 25,000-acre Liberty Ranch, along with 4,000 acres in the White Ranch, are pivotal properties in this focus area and are available for purchase. The Liberty Ranch has been offered for public purchase at an asking price of \$75-100 M (before appraisal). Regional planning and discussions with landowner interests in the surrounding area are anticipated to increase the yield of habitat value associated with the potential purchase of the Liberty Ranch, by CA DF&G and the Wildlife Conservation Board, and would also yield benefits to these adjacent landowners through additional flood protection, operational cost-savings, improved water supplies and relief from regulatory concerns.

An additional priority is the current BLM – CA State Parks “Ancient Valley” State Park initiative in the Alpaugh area. Exploration and conceptual development of this potential new State park is now underway. Funding of this initiative will realize significant local and regional economic benefits.

In order to bring such new and expanded public benefit and use opportunities in the Tulare Basin to fruition — for agricultural productivity, recreation, hunting, education, interpretation, cultural history, and state and federal T & E species and migratory bird protection — the TBWP and its agency partners seek major short- and long-term streams of public and private funding.

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