

200 W. Willmott Avenue
Los Banos, CA 93635-5501



(209) 826-5188
Fax (209) 826-4984
Email: veronica@gwdwater.org

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Pepper Snyder
President

Doug Federighi
Vice President

Byron Hisey

Tom Mackey

Bob Nardi

Ricardo Ortega
General Manager

Veronica A. Woodruff
Treasurer/Controller

Adams Broadwell Joseph Cardozo PC
General Counsel

June 23, 2015

VIA E-MAIL

Felicia Marcus
Chair
State Water Resources Control Board

Tom Howard
Executive Director
State Water Resources Control Board

Les Grober
State Water Resources Control Board

Diane Riddle
State Water Resources Control Board

Re: Central Valley Project South of Delta Operations Plan and Wildlife Protective Measures

Dear Chairwoman Marcus, Director Howard, Mr. Grober and Ms. Riddle,

Grassland Water District (District) is the largest south-of-delta wildlife refuge area in the San Joaquin Valley of California, and also conveys water to the refuges of the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFW) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The District has followed closely the development and revision of the 2015 Sacramento River Temperature Operations Plan (TOP), in an effort to determine the effect it will have on refuge water deliveries.

This letter describes the minimum amount of projected "Level 2" refuge water deliveries for the San Joaquin Valley during the upcoming fall and winter months. The water delivery schedule below does not guarantee refuge sustainability or the avoidance of avian disease outbreaks this year. Food resources for refuge-dependent species are greatly depleted, and the observed body condition of migratory birds has declined. The risk of starvation and disease on the refuges remains high. This water schedule also does not account for the sharp decline in

available “Level 4” refuge water supplies, which are required for optimum habitat management.

The State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) is currently considering a revised TOP, and will also consider future extensions or revisions to the Temporary Urgency Change Petition (TUCP) for the operation of the Central Valley Project (CVP) and State Water Project. Please ensure that protective measures for refuges are put into place as part of this process. Many species, in addition to fish, will be directly affected by project operational decisions this year, and those species must be given adequate consideration and protection.

Refuges in the San Joaquin Valley provide over 160,000 acres of high-quality managed wetland habitat for hundreds of species, including dozens of threatened and endangered species such as the giant garter snake and the California tiger salamander.¹ The wetland complex is known as the Grasslands Ecological Area (GEA) and it provides wintering habitat for millions of ducks, geese, shorebirds and other migratory birds each year, hosting 20% of the total migratory waterbird population in North America.

The importance of the GEA as a refuge for biodiversity in California cannot be overstated. The GEA comprises the largest contiguous wetland area west of the Rocky Mountains and the largest remaining expanse of riparian habitat in the San Joaquin Valley. The establishment and protection of the GEA was a critical component in the successful de-listing of the once-endangered Aleutian Canada goose in 2001.²

2015 is the second consecutive year that CVP operations on the Sacramento River precluded spring and summer irrigations in the GEA and greatly reduced fall and winter refuge water deliveries. The resulting impacts to the habitat and biodiversity of the GEA is significant. Biologists now fear that the last remaining breeding population of the giant garter snake in the San Joaquin Valley, which is located in the GEA, will not persist. Tri-colored blackbirds and local breeding duck and pheasant populations also plummeted, and migratory bird returns declined. Operational decisions that continue to deplete the GEA of water may cause permanent and irreversible damage to species of concern and the migratory path of birds on the Pacific Flyway.

Your agency must help develop a CVP south-of-delta summer-fall water operations plan in conjunction with the Sacramento River TOP that facilitates delivery as soon as possible of water supplies reserved for the TOP as that purpose is satisfied, and prioritization of refuge water deliveries. Below is a schedule for

¹ <http://www.fws.gov/news/ShowNews.cfm?newsId=DF137251-1143-3066-40D014B645400E2F>

² See Garone, Phillip, *The Fall and Rise of the Wetlands of California's Great Central Valley*, University of California Press (2011).

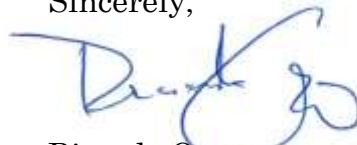
water deliveries that the San Joaquin Valley refuges are collectively expecting to receive from direct delta diversions this fall and winter. These quantities are less than what is legally mandated for the refuges in drought years, and less than what will likely be needed to stave off disease outbreaks and provide adequate food and habitat for migratory birds. This minimal supply, however, is considered to be critical for preventing even greater ecological damage during the current water crisis.

SOD CVP REFUGE DEMAND

MONTH	(AF)
September	27,000
October	64,000
November	30,000
December	22,000
January	12,000
February	8,000
Total (Sept-Feb)	163,000

Please ensure that protections are built into the TOP and TUCP operational plans that will provide these minimum water deliveries to the San Joaquin Valley refuges and the species that depend on them.

Sincerely,



Ricardo Ortega
General Manager

cc (via e-mail): Frances Spivey-Weber, Tam Doduc, Steven Moore, Doreen D'Adamo