

A FEDERAL WETLAND PRESERVATION PROGRAM FOR CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT.

Historically, 5 million acres of wetland habitat existed in California, primarily in the Central Valley. Today, less than 450,000 acres remain. The surviving wetland habitat supports more than 60% of the Pacific Flyway's waterfowl. About 55% of California's wetlands are owned and maintained by private interests, primarily duck clubs, with the balance protected as State and federal areas. In 1978, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a Conservation Easement Program to help protect private wetlands in California. Using duck stamp funds, a one-time cash payment is made to club owners on a willing-seller basis. Clubs under Easement remain in private ownership, but must continue to be managed as wetland habitat in perpetuity. As of September, 1982, Conservation Easements have been acquired on about 17,500 acres of duck clubs in the "Grasslands" of Merced County and in the Butte Sink 715 acres are under Easement. In today's climate of tight federal budgets, outright purchase of new refuge lands for waterfowl is not always feasible, but purchasing Easements is an effective way to preserve our remaining wetlands.

The story has been repeated many times and most dedicated conservationists, biologists and waterfowl hunters in California probably quote the statistics. At one time, 5 million acres of wetland habitat existed in California, primarily in the Central Valley (Anderson and Kozlik 1964). Most of this has been drained and today, less than 450,000 acres remain statewide. The surviving Central Valley wetland habitat alone (300,000 acres) supports over 60% of the Pacific Flyway's waterfowl population which peak at more than 9 million birds by late December (Pacific Flyway Study Committee 1972-82).

During the drought years of the 1930s, federal, State and private organizations began efforts to acquire and improve wetlands to help safeguard waterfowl breeding grounds in Canada and the United States (Gavin 1964). These efforts have continued and have tremendously helped offset the loss of breeding habitat to agriculture, industry and urbanization (G.R. Zahm, personal communication).

At present, one of the most critical problems confronting waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway occurs on the wintering grounds. Conversion of wetlands to agricultural uses, limited water resources, decreasing water quality, urban expansion and other problems are causing continued habitat loss and degradation. Both State and federal biologists agree that there is a shortage of wintering habitat in California relative to available Pacific Flyway breeding habitat (Shannon 1965). This imbalance has reached a point where wintering habitat may be limiting the populations of some Pacific Flyway waterfowl species (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1978).

Efforts to protect habitat on migration areas and wintering grounds began as early as 1908, with the establishment of Lower Klamath National Wildlife Refuge. Central Valley habitat preservation activities began in the early 1930s, with the establishment of the Los Banos Wildlife Area and Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge. Land acquisition continued and today

about 200,000 acres of land are protected in California as National Wildlife Refuges and State Wildlife Management Areas (Anderson and Kozlik 1964, California Department of Fish and Game 1979).

State and federal areas account for nearly 45% of the wetlands in California, with the balance maintained by private landowners, primarily duck hunting clubs. Wetlands in California that still support duck clubs include the Butte Sink, Suisun Marsh, Delta, Colusa Basin, Yolo Basin, Merced County Grasslands, Salton Sea and Kern-Wasco areas (Gilmer et al. 1982). See Figure 1.

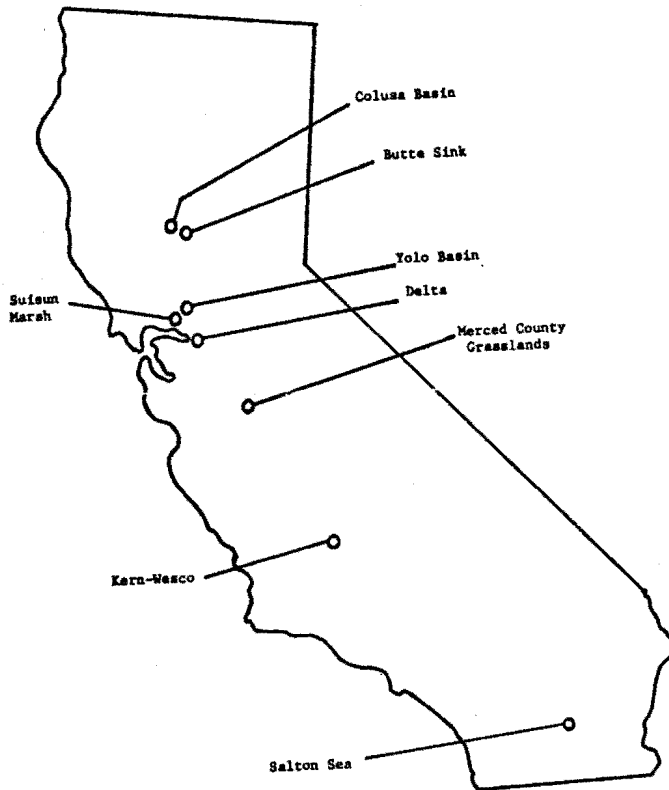


Figure 1. Wetland areas that support the majority of California's duck clubs.

Some of these clubs have maintained wetland habitat for nearly 100 years. Their accomplishments parallel those of State and federal areas. They preserve habitat, produce waterfowl foods, control depredations on agricultural crops and provide hunting. Most duck clubs are found on seasonal wetlands and most are managed to some degree.

Many California duck clubs permit hunting only on the traditional shooting days of Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, while others allow shooting only on weekends. On the non-shooting days, thousands of waterfowl disperse throughout the private marshes, where undisturbed, they feed and rest. Before and after the hunting seasons, many private clubs also provide habitat which decreases depredation potential and aids in returning birds to their nesting grounds in good physical condition.

Primarily, duck clubs preserve and maintain habitat to perpetuate the traditions associated with waterfowl hunting. Until recently, the land value of marshes was often low and the highest value to the landowner was waterfowl hunting. Inflation has changed the picture and land values have escalated along with water and other operating costs. In addition, farming practices have improved to a point where agricultural interests can now cost-effectively drain and reclaim marshland. Poor quality soils and inadequate drainage are

common to most wetland soils. By installation of drainage systems and heavy applications of soil amendments, these areas can now be improved to provide high quality cash crops such as sugar beets, cotton, or rice in just a few years. These factors are making it increasingly difficult to maintain duck clubs in natural wetland habitat.

In 1978, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated the Conservation Easement Program in California's Central Valley. Using funds generated from the annual sale of duck stamps, a one-time cash payment is made to the club on a willing-seller basis. Clubs under the Easement Program remain in private ownership and must continue to be managed for waterfowl. The 62,000 acres of privately owned wetland habitat in the "Grasslands" area of Merced County and 11,000 acres in Sacramento Valley's Butte Sink were selected for the program because of their importance to Pacific Flyway waterfowl which traditionally migrate to these natural marshlands. Up to 1.4 million waterfowl utilize the "Grasslands" during the fall and winter, while wintering populations of ducks and geese in the Butte Sink peak at more than one million. Additionally, the "Grasslands" and Butte Sink are California wetlands that retain at least some of their ancestral character which adds to their total biological value to waterfowl and other wildlife.

To date, duck clubs controlling approximately 17,500 acres have signed agreements with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the "Grasslands." In the Butte Sink, a 440-acre sanctuary known as the "Bean Patch," has been purchased in fee title and 715 acres are protected by Easements.

The Easements are designed to preserve the existing land use conditions in perpetuity. To comply with the Easement stipulations, the landowner cannot alter the land for agriculture or urban development; it must be maintained as wetland habitat. The right of the landowner to hunt the property and control public access does not change. Landowners can sell their property, but the Easement contract becomes part of the title and will apply to any new owners. Cattle grazing and any other management activities that do not change the present character of the land are not affected by the Easement. The landowner retains the right to develop oil, gas and mineral resources by methods that do not interfere with the land's primary use as waterfowl habitat.

To help maintain and upgrade the quality of marsh habitat in the "Grasslands," Butte Sink and other Central Valley wetlands, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has stationed biologists at San Luis National Wildlife Refuge in Los Banos and Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge in Willows. These biologists coordinate the Easement Program and provide technical assistance to private duck clubs. Areas where assistance can be provided to club owners include food plant production, water management, control of undesirable vegetation and grazing management. The California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service also have technical assistance programs and all three agencies frequently cooperate in private marshland improvement projects.

Initially it may sound like a select few individuals are reaping the benefits from monies that all waterfowl hunters, not just club hunters, contribute. If wetland habitat were abundant in California and if State and federal agencies owned enough land to accommodate 9 million waterfowl during the fall and winter, this program would be unnecessary. But in the face of accelerated land conversion for agricultural and urban use, plus the fact that federal and State agencies can never hope to own and manage enough habitat to insure huntable waterfowl populations, private landowners must be encouraged to preserve their waterfowl habitat. These private wetlands also provide habitat for a wide variety of migratory and resident non-game birds, whose continued existence is important to the nonconsumptive user.

Under the Easement Program, each dollar expended can protect up to four times more habitat than if the duck stamp money was spent purchasing land for new refuges. Additionally, once refuge lands are purchased, they must be managed at the taxpayer's expense, while Easement lands are maintained at almost no cost to the public. In today's climate of tight federal budgets, outright purchase and management of additional refuge lands for waterfowl is not always feasible, but purchasing or receiving donated Easements is an effective way to preserve wetlands.

The Easement Program has been successful in some areas of California and hopefully, this success will continue. The program can preserve thousands of acres of wetlands, thereby perpetuating our waterfowl resources for future generations to enjoy.

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