

Public needs flood safety, Conaway Ranch

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The Conaway Ranch is 27 square miles of farmland, floodplain and nature reserve that sits at ground zero of the largest bottleneck in the Sacramento River flood-control system. When the next 100-year flood arrives, this bottleneck will threaten all the major cities of the lower Sacramento Valley – Sacramento, West Sacramento, Davis, Woodland, Marysville and Yuba City – as well as many unincorporated towns in Yolo, Sutter and Sacramento counties.

The current flood-bypass system, which depends on the Yolo Bypass and Sutter Bypass "safety valves," is seriously inadequate. Engineering analyses say it would protect against an 80-year flood at best.

To reach the minimally acceptable level of flood protection, all of the westernmost levees on Conaway Ranch need to be moved as far to the west as possible. And that is why it is right and justified that Conaway Ranch should have new owners – but not private ones. The highest and best use of the entire Conaway Ranch is not farmland or habitat. It is floodplain. And for that reason, it should be owned and managed by the public.

The Conaway Ranch property should be acquired by a consortium of all the public entities threatened by Sacramento River floods. This consortium would be governed by a joint powers authority, and costs to acquire the property would be proportional to the benefit received from the flood protection afforded to each respective municipality.

Last week Yolo County supervisors declared a two-year moratorium on outside interests creating habitat-mitigation projects there. In April 2006, Yolo County tried – and failed – to purchase the property using the public's right of eminent domain. The supervisors were concerned then, as they are today, about farmland loss. They had the right idea for the wrong reason. And Yolo should not have had to go it alone.

A publicly owned Conaway Ranch with set-back levees, managed chiefly as a floodplain, could still perform multiple other functions, such as rice farming or wetlands. In fact, it might even do those things better than it does now: Rice farming could be permanently protected through easements. Greater flood-channel capacity would mean more riparian (water's-edge) habitat – badly needed in a valley that has lost more than 90 percent of its original riparian forests and wetlands.

As a landscape ecologist teaching and conducting research at UC Davis, I have been studying the Sacramento River and its floodplain for nearly 25 years. With no economic interest in the matter, I can offer this science-based opinion.

The location and attributes of Conaway Ranch offer incredible opportunities to whoever acquires it, but none is greater than its ability to protect us from the floodwaters of the Sacramento River. With a little ingenuity and leadership we could have flood protection, rice farming, thriving wetlands and riparian forests, all in one.