

County supervisors approve habitat project in Yolo Bypass

Sarah Dowling, Woodland Daily Democrat, 3-12-14

An endangered species that calls the Yolo Bypass its home may soon be seeing an increase in numbers thanks to a new habitat conservation project.

After a lengthy discussion, the Yolo County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a resolution on Tuesday authorizing the first phase of the project for the giant garter snake.

The first phase would utilize a 137-acre parcel in the Yolo Bypass, located approximately 10 miles southeast of the City of Davis, for a conservation bank helping the endangered species.

Planning of the habitat has been long in the making, the first completed proposal being denied by the Yolo County Planning Commission in July 2013. The commission's recommendation was primarily based on concerns about the loss of farmland and the biological necessity for the conservation bank.

"Obviously, the biological issues are very big," said Eric Parfrey, principal planner of the project.

According to Parfrey, one of main issues that people are concerned about is whether the bypass is a good location for the habitat.

The portion of the bypass chosen for the initial 137-acre parcel is part of a larger 1,242-acre ranch owned by the Smith family. It is directly adjacent to the already established Pope Ranch Conservation Bank, which has also developed a giant garter snake habitat.

Supervisor Jim Provenza voiced concerns about embarking on a new conservation project, especially with Pope Ranch being in the same part of the bypass. "Is the project the same?" he asked.

Parfrey said that the two projects are "significantly different." Pope Ranch was first established a decade ago, and since then a lot of research has been done on what these snakes need to thrive.

The project would create a mix of wetland types with variable water depth and duration of ponding, ranging from shallow, seasonal wetlands to perennial wetlands with associated deep channels. The upland habitat would be graded to include mounds above variety of flood elevations, including the 100-year flood elevation to provide opportunities for the snakes to escape floods and to possibly capture snakes that are transported down the bypass during high flow events.

The other main area of concern among the supervisors had to do with the loss of farmland in the bypass, particularly for rice growers.

"Here we have another chunk of Yolo County farmland being put into habitat," said Supervisor Matt Rexroad.

Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, who admitted that he is usually the one concerned about losing farmland, said that it is too cold in that part of the basin for farming. "Temperature makes a huge difference in growing rice," he said.

He added that if the county is going to convert agricultural land to habitat, that "this is the place to do it."

Rice is the top three commodity in the county, grossing more than \$60 million in 2012, according to the Yolo County Crop Report.

Parfrey and the others involved in the project did not deny the effects it would have on local agriculture. The board letter states that "the project would reduce agricultural output by approximately \$122,000 annually, if the site had been in production of rice" and that the reduction in farming "would lower annual employment by 0.6 full time equivalent jobs."

After further discussion, the board voted to approve the staff taking out the necessary permits to begin the first phase of construction on the project, which would take an estimated 100 days to complete. If successful in Phase 1, there will be discussions of future phases to expand the conservation bank to a larger acreage.