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Common sense drives local farmer's conservation efforts

A deep, abiding love for animals has driven John Anderson, owner of Hedgerow Farms, to create the largest farmland habitat restoration project in the county. But just plain common sense is what keeps him going.

"The habitat value of vegetated farm edges is just real," he said. "It's the obvious right thing to do with pieces of land if you want biodiversity," and maybe even if biodiversity is not your first love. Anderson said lack of time is what keeps farmers from buying into the concept – not disbelief in the benefits, which include better weed control, stable canal and slough banks and less potential for water run-off pollution.

Government, farmers and even irrigation districts have been interested for years in the concept of hedgerows between fields and along ditches. But time and money are short. While marketing has improved over the years, it's still not to the level it could be, Anderson said.

"The State Water Resources Control Board is promoting this but there is no money for Best Management

Practices," Anderson said. "I've spoken to other growers and they say they just don't have the time."

Anderson acknowledges that programs paying \$70 to \$80 an acre per year to take fields out of production for wildlife habitat, is not enough to offset potential income, unless the soil is poor. But he also knows that growers don't have to take on huge projects to make a difference.

"They can just do the edges," he said. "The water from the fields that flows in the canals has the potential to put pollutants in the groundwater. Plants can reduce that risk. The dense vegetation of sedges, rushes, creeping wild rye and

deer grass reduces weeds. And planting riparian trees (willows, cottonwoods or valley oaks) creates shading on the canal and reduces evapo-transpiration.

"The important thing about trees is to place them where they don't impact routine maintenance. In general, 30 feet from the canal is a good rule."

Anderson knows it's not easy. He notes that he "actually made money" last year producing native seeds and plugs – primarily because government programs promote the use of native plants. He said it's been 15 years of hard work, worth every struggle.



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“In just two or three years, the results were obvious. It convinced us this is the way we should go in the future.”

From 50 acres in 1974 to nearly 600 acres today, Hedgerow Farms continues to research which native plants are most beneficial and economical. Some of Anderson’s first experiments have shown that his practice of planting natives along canals, sloughs and roadsides can drive out pesky weeds, stabilize canal banks and provide food and cover for a variety of critters. He said crop damage from these invited animals is insignificant when a grower is farming thousands of acres.

One seed at a time: At one time Anderson had a “pie in the sky” viewpoint of transforming his acreage on County Road 88 into an animal haven. In the early years, he sat on a hill above his land with friend and peer Charlie Rominger and envisioned Union School Slough and Willow Slough as corridors that would support the movement of deer, and other wildlife from the open space foothills to the Yolo Bypass wildlife area. That hasn’t happened in so many words, but he has witnessed small increments of that vision – otters find their way to his land through the slough and canal systems, staff routinely see snakes and lizards and 120 species of birds have been identified on the property as well as beneficial insects. Deer tracks on the levee are a common site. He and his wife even witnessed the suc-

cessful rearing of five sets of twin deer last year.

Now he’s more patient and realizes it takes time.

The future: Anderson can instantly spot a Purple needlegrass among thousands of non-native grasses and immediately identify the specie of ducks flying overhead even with his vision obscured by branches of the willow trees he planted 15 years ago. His obsession and learned skills has paved the way for others, making native plants more accessible as well as knowledge about what works and what doesn’t. But there’s still more work to be done.

“Marketing is the weakest link, it always has been. We need to be knocking on doors and putting information at every feasible agricultural location,” he said. ☞

John Anderson was a Yolo County Resource Conservation District director for 10 years (from 1988 to 1998). He’s currently a director of Audubon California.



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Problematic farmland transforms into wildlife habitat

A newly built “south pond”, located on Nancy Baker’s property on County Road 45, is popping with grass seedlings and holds the promise of being alive with the buzz of insects and songbirds this spring.

Students through the SLEWS project planted 2,500 plugs of grass and rushes and 45 willow, cottonwood and mulefat cuttings around the south and north ponds of this 2000-foot natural swale restoration and hedgerow project, a unique collaboration of four landowners solving a winter flooding and erosion problem – together.

“It’s going to be remarkable,” Baker said. “I’m in awe of the transformation it’s making. I hope other people will see it and want to do something like this.”

Many years ago the four properties had a natural swale that impeded profitable farming efforts. To alleviate this, ditches were installed on the edges of the properties and the swale eliminated. However, flood waters were uncooperative and still showed up in inconvenient locations and even impeded farming in some areas.

“We have replaced the original swale, taken the problematic land out of production and purposefully created wildlife habitat with native vegetation,” said YCRCR Project Manager Jenny Drewitz. “This slows down the flow of winter rains, creating an opportunity for groundwater recharge, and reduces erosion.” The north pond, located on the upstream neighbor’s property, has been planted with native grasses and will be further landscaped next fall by the landowners. Full maturity of these efforts is expected in 5 to 10 years when the bushes and trees have reached full maturity. Partners for Fish and Wildlife funded this project with a match from landowners. ☞

Reduction of pesticides in runoff water focus of vegetated ditch project

A project is underway at Harlan & Dumars farm in Woodland to determine if ditches vegetated with grasses and sedges can reduce both sediment and residues of pesticides of concern on the State's 303(d) list – such as diazinon and chlorpyrifos – and prevent future 303 (d) listings of the potential alternative pesticides (e.g. pyrethroids).

Portions of the experimental ditches were either seeded with annual vegetation or planted with plugs of native perennial grasses, sedges and rushes the third week of February.

“This will be important, as the State’s water quality control plans include sediment, chemical-specific and toxicity objectives,” said Jeanette Wrynski, project manager. “Both analytical and toxicological endpoint assessment will provide information on the effectiveness of vegetated drainage ditches as Best Management Practices and will assist future management decisions.”

The first step is to determine the optimal ditch design and then implement the findings the second year. It’s anticipated that during the second year three to five farmers will have the opportunity to implement the mitigation practices identified in year one. YCRCD staff is currently recruiting cooperative farmers interested in the project. Contact Kyle Wooldridge at ext. 120.



An expert team has been assembled to monitor and assess the project over the next two years. They include

Michael Barbour, PhD, of Tetra Tech in Owings Mills, Maryland; Charlie Cooper, PhD, of the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Oxford, Mississippi; David Crane of the California Department of Fish & Game in Rancho Cordova; Debra Denton, PhD from USEPA Region 9 SWRCB in Sacramento; Victor de Vlaming, PhD from the Aquatic Toxicology Lab at UC Davis; Robert Holmes from the California Regional Water Quality Control Board; Jeff Miller PhD from Aqua Science in Davis; Matt Moore, PhD from USDA-Ag Research Service in Oxford, Mississippi; John Rodgers, PhD from Clemson University in Pendleton, South Carolina; Martin Williams, P.E. of Waterborne Environmental, Inc in Leesburg, Virginia; and Blake Harlan, cooperating farmer of Harlan & Dumars in Woodland. ☞

Conservation project SPRING calendar

- Grass seed can be drilled or broadcast as late as March but it’s preferable to have done this last fall. (Late plantings will require additional irrigation, which makes for a nasty crop of weeds as well.) For those just planning projects, the seed bed can be prepared from March to September. Disking in spring and/or burning in fall removes weeds and prepares the soil for planting.
- For already seeded areas, in the spring, mow, hay or lightly graze planted areas to remove annual grasses before they produce viable seed (in a wet spring, this may need to be repeated). Spray phenoxy herbicides in February and March to eliminate broadleaf weeds.
- Spring is a critical period for weed control by hoeing, mowing or chemicals as needed.
- New native perennial, shrub and tree plantings will need irrigation through their first two growing seasons at least. Make sure to set your irrigation system up before the rains stop.

Mobile Water Lab season has begun!

The Yolo-Colusa Mobile Water Lab is making appointments for irrigation evaluations during the 2005 irrigation season. With the cost of electricity and water and the recent interest in irrigation runoff water quality due to the Ag Waiver, it is important to maintain good irrigation management practices.

Our free and confidential services include irrigation system evaluations, water management recommendations, soil surveys, accurate acreage calculations and water quality tests.

If you are interested in hearing more about the program, or would like to schedule an evaluation, call the Mobile Water Lab at (530) 662-2037 x120. ☞

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT EQUIPMENT FOR RENT OR HIRE

Want to plant or maintain a roadside or plot of native grass but lack the equipment? The YCRCD can assist you with specialized equipment for native planting and maintenance, including a harrow, seeder, and mower—all pullable by ATV.

Contact Jenny Drewitz at 530.662.2037, ext.114 for more information on specifications and rates for rental or hire.



Audubon California Landowner Stewardship Program & The Center for Land-Based Learning

Ag Futures Alliance in Yolo County

Aiming for a perfect world, where each interest works together for the good of each other, doesn't seem impossible to members of Ag Futures Alliances (AFA), a statewide consortium that encourages regional solutions.

A Yolo County Ag Futures Alliances group is in its developing stages and looking to Ventura County as a model.

"We want to serve the county in a way that's compatible with agricultural operations, showing how a century-old conservation organization can work with agriculture and county government in a way that's economically feasible," said Vance Russell, director of Audubon California's Landowner Stewardship Program and a member of Yolo County's AFA.

Six years ago in Ventura County a mix of agriculture producers, community leaders and environmentalists sat down at the same table and saw eye-to-eye. They have since helped began a farm worker housing initiative and written policy statements that have turned into accepted guidelines regarding the use of pesticides around schools. The results have been encouraging enough for Yolo, Merced and King counties to try and do the same.

"It's consumers becoming reconnected with agriculture and the value of agriculture. It's government taking a look at the kind of policies that encourage sustainable types of land use and farm practices. It's working with the triangle — agriculture, consumers and community — to bring government policies into alignment," said Joseph McIntyre of Ag Innovations, the company that received seed money from Roots of Change to

begin Ag Futures Alliances throughout the state. "We want to truly define the root problem and then find solutions that a broad constituency can support.

"Leaders find the roundtable approach is a viable alternative to the typical adversarial politics that drive our governments," he added. "There's no one right way to do things. AFA is a framework for people to have a conversation among a group of peers, recognizing the value of all the contributions in the room."

Yolo County farmer Charlie Rominger said, because of the many big issues the county is currently facing, he wishes the diverse interests had started seeking common ground five years ago.

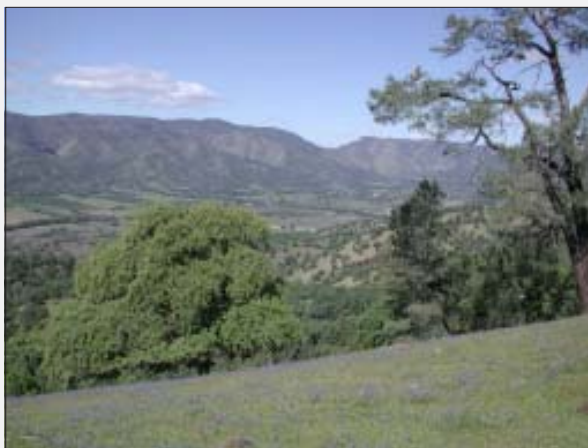
"There are things that we all want to see happen but we've never got together on before," he said. "For example, Assemblywoman

Lois Wolk's proposed Wild and Scenic bill for Cache Creek: There's a huge amount of common ground. Yet, there's a real sharp division in opinions among the stakeholders."

AFA hopes to reduce that division and others by bringing more interests to the table and providing a safe environment for collaboration. The ultimate goal is to develop a firm set of core beliefs, by consensus, that will direct the group's future action.

The direction Yolo AFA will take is still up in the air. But the first step has been taken: community leaders, farmers and environmentalists are talking to each other.

For more information contact: McIntyre at (707) 480-7165 or Yolo County Ag Commissioner Rick Landon at (530) 666-8140. ☞



Woodland NRCS chosen for CSP

The NRCS Woodland Service Center has been chosen to participate in the Conservation Security Program serving two watersheds: the Lower Sacramento Watershed and Stone Corral Watershed. These watersheds are two of only five chosen in California for 2005.

“We are anxious to reward California farmers for their conservation efforts through this program,” said Phil Hogan, Natural Resources Conservation Service district conservationist. “Many of them have been practicing soil and water conservation on their farmland and they should be encouraged to motivate others to become good stewards of the land.”

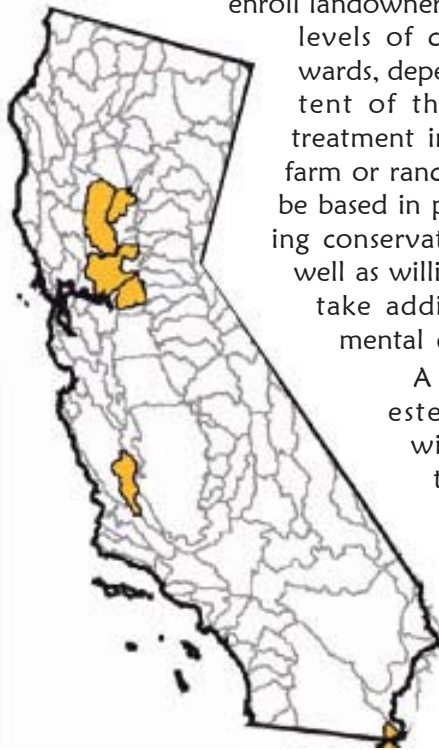
The Conservation Security Program (CSP) is a voluntary program introduced in the 2002 Farm Bill that provides financial and technical assistance to promote conservation and improvement of soil, water, air energy, plant and animal life, and other conservation activities on Tribal and private working lands. Working lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture and range land as well as forested land that is an incidental part of an agricultural operation. Across the United States 202 watersheds will participate in CSP. Yolo County includes two of the six watersheds selected in California (see map below).

In exchange for five or ten year contracts, CSP will enroll landowners in one of three levels of conservation rewards, depending on the extent of the conservation treatment in place on their farm or ranch. Payments will be based in part on the existing conservation practices as well as willingness to undertake additional environmental enhancements.

A meeting for interested landowners will take place at the Winters Community Center, March 30, from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Landowners should begin the self-assessment process now by access-

ing the web site at <http://csp.sc.egov.usda.gov/>.

Applications will be taken at the Woodland Services Center starting in late March. For more information contact Phil Hogan at 662-2037, ext. 111. ☞



Willow Wattles replace garbage

An historic dump site at Sumner Stone’s Alphabet Farm is now a vegetated gully returning to its natural state of wildlife habitat. One of three Integrated Waste Management Board projects YCRCD has facilitated over the last 12 months; Mr. Stone’s project involved removing a variety of waste material including household waste, appliances, automobiles, scrap metal, tires and agricultural waste. The waste was an eyesore, exacerbated erosion and compromised wildlife habitat.

This project was done in concert with a second site cleanup at the Bud Kay Ranch where two historic dumpsites were located in old gullies. After the waste materials were removed, the sites were re-vegetated with native grasses and acorns.

The third project is being implemented at the Paddock Orchard where the waste material has been a nuisance and safety concern. The waste also has impeded expansion of the farming operation and is an environmental detriment to Little Lamb Valley Slough into which it was dumped. Removal of the waste has allowed an extension of the riparian restoration efforts of the Audubon Landowner Stewardship Program, allowing them to revegetate a 450’ gap in an otherwise contiguous 5,000-foot-long slough restoration project. ☞



Photo by Sumner Stone

Willow Wattles reduce erosion in a gully recently cleared of garbage and replaced with native vegetation.

FREE Irrigation
&
Water Quality Testing!

see story on page 3

Yolo County RCD Publications

The Yolo County RCD offers various resource material for sale. To place an order, send your request to Yolo County RCD - Orders, 221 W. Court Street, Suite 1, Woodland, CA 95695; call 530.662.2037, ext. 119; or send an e-mail to mcloud@yolorcd.org.



Please add tax and shipping and handling costs to publication prices below:

- Know Your Natives: A Pictorial Guide to California Native Grasses (includes supplement) \$30
- Bring Farm Edges Back to Life! \$15
- California Native Grass (poster) \$17
- Monitoring on Your Farm \$15
- Working Habitat for Working Farms (video) \$10
- Yolo County Soil Survey (CD-ROM) \$13.92
- Capay Valley Conservation & Restoration Manual \$15
(free to Capay Valley residents)



Please add 7.75% sales tax to prices

Shipping & handling:

(no charge if item is purchased on site)

1 item: \$3.00

2-5 items: \$5.00

6-10 items: \$10.00

more than 10 items: \$15.00

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