

Countywide habitat conservation plan now under review



JIM SMITH-DAILY DEMOCRAT

Petra Marchand, director of the Yolo Habitat Conservation Plan, briefs the Woodland City Council on the document that is nearing completion.

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Woodland's City Council got the first official look at a countywide Habitat Conservation Plan that has been in the making since 2002.

The multi-species conservation effort is now undergoing a 90-day public comment period for development of an environmental report.

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When completed, it's hoped the plan will be a model for other communities throughout state in its protection of both habitat and agriculture, according to Petrea Marchand, executive director of the Conservancy.

Marchand took over direction in 2012 of the joint powers agreement between the county and its four incorporated cities and if all goes well she anticipates formal adoption by fall 2018.

No official action was taken by Woodland's council, although Councilman Tom Stallard noted the plan actually dates back to 1993, when it was first envisioned.

It was also referenced by Marchand that the original plan sought to protect 32 either threatened or endangered species. Today that number has been reduced to 12 and includes mainly birds, animals and insects such as the Swainson's Hawk and Western Burrowing Owl, Tri-Colored Blackbird and White tailed Kite along with the Giant garter snake and Elderberry Longhorn Beetle.

Identification of such species is critical but property owners on whose lands the species live could be forced to pay fees for their protection. Other fees could be used to purchase entire parcels of land.

In fact, according to Marchand, implementation of the plan will cost \$371.4 million over the next 50 years of which an estimated 64 percent will be paid by project fees, another 12 percent by state and federal grants and 3 percent from investment interests. That may sound like a lot, but initial estimates put the plan's cost at around \$500 million.

Mayor Angel Barajas said it was good to see that cost come down.

The plan area encompasses 653,549 acres in Yolo County and includes conservation activities outside the county within an additional 1,174 acres along Putah Creek in Solano County and is designed to streamline and coordinate the process for approving and resolving problems with endangered or threatened species and their habitats without having to go to other state or federal agencies.

In all, around 33,000 acres would fall under the plan's coverage area.

Yolo County and its cities have already conserved 90,967 acres countywide, of which 34,282 acres are in permanent conservation easements.

Those areas covered under the plan include land uses contemplated in local general plans such as Woodland's recently adopted 2035 General Plan. The covered activities have been organized into five broad categories: urban projects and activities, rural projects and activities, operations and maintenance, conservation strategy implementation, and neighboring landowner protection program.

Marchand explained the first two categories comprise “spatially defined” activities. This refers to activities where the location is currently known. These two categories total 17,551 acres, within which 11,510 acres of impact are modeled to occur over the life of the permit.

The remaining three categories comprise the “spatially undefined” categories (activities where a specific location is not yet known) consisting of 506 acres for operation and maintenance, 956 acres for restoration and enhancement, and 2,347 acres for the neighboring landowner protection program (applicable only to four of the 12 covered species).

Within the three spatially undefined categories an additional 1,139 acres of impact are assumed to occur for a total of 12,649 acres of impact (11,510 acres plus 1,139 acres).

As mitigation for impacts to this 12,649 acres, the plan requires 17,131 acres of mitigation and 16,231 acres of conservation beyond mitigation (including 8,000 acres of pre-permit reserve lands) for 33,362 acres. In general, this obligation will be satisfied by the payment of per-acres fees by “project proponents,” the most common of which will be the base fee of \$11,231 per acre. In addition, project proponents must implement a series of Avoidance and Minimization Measures as conditions on approved covered activities.

Earlier, Yolo County Supervisor and Chairman of the Conservancy, Jim Prozenza said that “We intend to demonstrate that protection of endangered species can be accomplished hand-in-hand with promotion of agriculture and a strong farm economy.”

“The completion of the Yolo Plan will improve outcomes for endangered species through a science-based conservation strategy, as well as partnerships with local conservation organizations and city and county open space programs,” said Conservancy Vice-Chairman Lucas Frerichs, also a member of the Davis City Council. “The Board of Directors is proud to bring this innovative approach to Endangered Species Act implementation to Yolo County.”