



Yolo County's new Habitat Conservation Plan aims to coordinate mitigation efforts to benefit these 12 sensitive species, conserve habitat and support the county's agricultural economy. Yolo County/Courtesy graphic

**Agriculture + Environment**

# Draft Yolo habitat conservation plan aims to protect 12 species

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | July 09, 2017

Western burrowing owls, valley elderberry longhorn beetles and giant garter snakes are among the dozen species protected under the \$371 million, 50-year draft habitat and conservation plan currently circulating for public comment.

The Yolo Habitat and Conservation Plan and Natural Community Conservation Plan, released on June 1 for a 90-day public comment period, would provide Endangered Species Act permits and associated mitigation for infrastructure and development activities identified for construction over the next 50 years throughout the county.

The plan aims to coordinate mitigation efforts to benefit 12 sensitive species, conserve habitat and support the county's agricultural economy.

Efforts to protect the habitats of local endangered and threatened species — as required by state and federal law — while also accommodating development first began 25 years ago with a now-defunct program that focused on habitat conservation in eastern Yolo County.

That was replaced by the Yolo Habitat Conservancy in 2002, when a Joint Powers Authority consisting of Yolo County and the cities of Davis, Winters, Woodland and West Sacramento was formed to begin drafting habitat conservancy and natural community conservation plans.

Little was accomplished between 2002 and 2010-11, however, when an audit uncovered improper financial and accounting procedures, improperly borrowed funds and grants that weren't adequately managed.

According to Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis — who now chairs the conservancy board of directors — the agency's management committee at the time, consisting of himself, Yolo County Supervisor Don Saylor and West Sacramento City Council member Chris Ledesma, had to decide after that audit whether to continue with the conservancy's work or not.

“We felt that the project was moving too slowly and was not all that fiscally sound ... and we decided to go forward on the advice of the state and federal agencies, because our failure to do so would have resulted in habitat decisions being made in our county by the state and federal governments, which we don't think is the best way to go,” Provenza said last year.

“There is a reason to do this, and most of the money spent on this project is from the state and federal agencies who looked at our very transparent presentation of problems in the past and agreed that we should go forward with a new management and procedures.”

With the agency restructured and Petrea Marchand brought on board as executive director, the conservancy produced an initial plan several years ago that would have covered 32 species at a cost of \$500 million. However, the plan ultimately was rejected by the conservancy's board of directors due to its scope and cost.



The plan released last month has been scaled down to cover 12 species with an estimated cost of \$371 million (primarily for establishing reserves) over 50 years.

The bulk of the funding — \$238 million — comes from mitigation fees. Currently, public agencies and private developers pay for loss of endangered species habitat on a species-by-species basis. Under the draft plan, the new fee would cover 12 species and be assessed by acre.

Another \$78 million would come from the state and federal governments, including grant funding that is available only to counties with a habitat plan in place.

And local funding matches would make up much of the remaining cost — \$46 million — including funds from the city of Davis Open Space Program, the Yolo County Cache Creek Resources Management Program and the Solano County Water Agency/Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee.

Protected thanks to all of that would be 12 local species, including a plant (the palmate-bracted bird's beak); an invertebrate (the valley elderberry longhorn beetle); an amphibian (the California tiger salamander); two reptiles (the Western pond turtle and giant garter snake); and seven birds (the Swainson's hawk, white-tailed kite, western yellow-billed cuckoo, Western burrowing owl, Least Bell's vireo, bank swallow and tricolored blackbird).

And while the plan will focus on those 12 species, benefits will accrue for a wide array of plants and animals under the plan, supporters say.

Funds raised under the habitat plan would establish reserves for the conservation of those species, incorporate a range of gradients and high habitat diversity into the reserve system to compensate for shifting species distributions due to climate change and other circumstances, and protect and maintain habitat areas large enough to support sustainable populations of covered species.

The impact on local residents would be felt in part in any mitigation costs that developers pass on, including to new home buyers, though officials point out that's already often the case with mitigation fees.

The benefits — in addition to those reaped by protected species — will include a streamlined permitting process, supporters say.

Instead of having to go through multiple agencies as part of a development application (including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and local planning departments), developers would go through only the local planning department, which would review proposals for consistency with the habitat plan.

The plan also promotes preservation of agricultural land, supporters say.

Land owners and farmers will be the backbone of the strategy, as the plan will depend on land owners being interested in selling conservation easements or establishing mitigation sites on their property.

Easements can be donated or sold by land owners, who still retain property rights, including the ability to farm and live on the land.

The plan, Marchand said, “strikes a sensible balance between natural resource conservation, agricultural land protection and economic growth in the region.”

“The conservancy achieved this balance through a collaborative process that included not only the state and federal government, but dedicated members of the environmental, agricultural and development communities in Yolo County,” she added.

Provenza touted the local control the plan provides “in terms of how we protect habitat.”

“Whether you agree or disagree, it’s something we have to do and those decisions are going to be made at the state level or the local level and most people would prefer the local level, and that’s what we accomplish with this.”

Public comment on the draft plan, as well as on an environmental review document, will be taken through Aug. 30 and one last public meeting will be held Aug. 1, beginning at 6:30 p.m. in the Winters City Council chambers, 318 First St. Previous public meetings were held in Davis, Woodland and West Sacramento.

To learn more about the habitat plan or how to leave public comments on the draft, visit <https://www.yolohabitatconservancy.org/documents>.

**Read more:** “Grand jury slams Yolo Habitat Conservancy,” published July 3, 2016: <http://wp.me/p3aczg-2M3m>

— Reach Anne Ternus-Bellamy at [aternus@davisenterprise.net](mailto:aternus@davisenterprise.net) or 530-747-8051.  
Follow her on Twitter at @ATernusBellamy