



The Yolo Habitat and Conservation Plan aims to protect 12 sensitive species in Yolo County. Courtesy photo

Local News

Yolo Habitat Conservation Plan heads for final approval

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

Western burrowing owls, valley elderberry longhorn beetles and giant garter snakes are among the dozen species protected under the 50-year conservation plan local governments will consider for approval over the next two months.

The Yolo Habitat and Conservation Plan and Natural Community Conservation Plan will provide Endangered Species Act permits and associated mitigation for infrastructure and development projects 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.

The effort to protect the habitats of local endangered and threatened species — as required by state and federal law — while also accommodating development has been underway for years via a Joint Powers Authority (the Yolo Habitat

Conservancy) consisting of Yolo County and the cities of Davis, West Sacramento, Winters and Woodland.

Last week the conservancy — along with its partners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife — released the Final Yolo Habitat Conservation Plan and Natural Community Conservation Plan and final environmental review documents.

The Yolo County Board of Supervisors as well as the city councils in each of the four cities are expected to adopt the plan and approve the environmental review documents during upcoming public meetings.

The Davis City Council is scheduled to take up the matter on Tuesday, May 15, and the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, May 22.

The plan — at an estimated cost of \$406 million over 50 years — will result in new habitat reserves, thanks largely to farmers and ranchers willing to sell conservation easements or establish 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.

More than 66 percent of the funding needed would come from mitigation fees. Currently, public agencies and private developers pay for loss of endangered species habitat on a species-by-species basis. Under the new plan, the fee would cover 12 species and be assessed by acre.

State, federal and other sources would provide 21 percent of funding, while local agencies like the Davis Open Space Program, Cache Creek Area Plan and Lower Putah Creek would provide another 10 percent. Endowment funding and other sources would cover the remaining costs.

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.

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.

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.

“Yolo County wants its agricultural community to lead local efforts to demonstrate that protection of endangered species can be accomplished hand-in-hand with promotion of strong farm economy,” Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza, chair of the Yolo Habitat Conservancy, said last week.

“The Yolo Habitat Plan will help accomplish this goal,” Provenza said.

Davis City Councilman Lucas Frerichs, the conservancy’s vice chair, also hailed the plan’s completion, calling it “a major milestone in local efforts to 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.”

The conservancy’s executive director, Petrea Marchand, said the plan will serve as a model for other communities in California because of the partnerships with local farmers and ranchers to provide wildlife habitat.

“We would not be celebrating this accomplishment today without the longstanding support of all five of the conservancy’s member agencies, as well stakeholders representing farming, development and the environment,” Marchand said.

The full report can be viewed at <https://yolohabitatconservancy.org>.

— *Reach Anne Ternus-Bellamy at aternus@davisenterprise.net Follow her on Twitter at [@ATernusBellamy](https://twitter.com/ATernusBellamy).*