



## **Local Partnerships Planning Process: Collaborating with Agricultural Landowners and Local Communities to Meet CALFED Goals and Objectives**

Many landowners and local communities are concerned that they may be prevented from continuing to farm, ranch, or provide flood control on or near lands preserved or enhanced for habitat conservation purposes. To address this concern, among others, the Secretary for Resources and the Secretary for Food and Agriculture are facilitating and supporting a stakeholder working group that was convened to promote conservation partnerships between CALFED agencies, private landowners, local governments and conservation groups. The Secretaries believe that an approach that provides stakeholders with incentives and support, and assists them with bureaucratic and regulatory burdens, has the potential to result in a much greater level of success in returning ecological health to the Bay-Delta region. Toward these ends, the working group will explore and develop actions consistent with the following six strategies.

**1. Regulatory assistance/streamlining.** The CALFED agencies are encouraging local agencies and groups to develop long-term projects that, with the agencies' support, can be used to introduce mechanisms to ease regulatory burdens on landowners. The primary objective of the projects will be to demonstrate ways to ease regulatory compliance for wildlife conservation activities on agricultural lands, while minimizing liability of, and economic impacts on landowners of project and neighboring lands. In particular, the CALFED agencies will assist in implementing projects that address the regulatory issues of the state and federal Endangered Species Acts, California Environmental Quality Act, the Clean Water Act and other laws.

**2. Coordination of State and Federal assistance programs.** CALFED agencies will coordinate funding from their existing agricultural programs and activities with funding for related CALFED actions and other related funding sources. The CALFED Program has conducted an analysis of existing funding programs and opportunities for coordination. CALFED Program staff will work with the Department of Conservation, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Food and Agriculture, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and other appropriate agencies to take advantage of opportunities for funding coordination in ways that complement existing programs, such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, the California Farmland Conservancy Program, Flood Protection Corridor Program, and others.

**3. Supporting a Working Landscape Approach.** The CALFED agencies will take a flexible approach to habitat restoration and enhancement on agricultural lands that keeps agricultural land in production and in private ownership wherever possible. This approach makes use of a "conservation toolbox," relying on a variety of programmatic strategies and proven best management practices to promote working landscapes that are profitable for agriculture and beneficial for wildlife. This conservation toolbox will include processes and practices, but also technical and financial assistance, information and outreach, and institutional capacity-building.

The working landscape approach will be demonstrated through projects (see Item 1, above) with producers that are representative of their regions. For example, projects within the Sacramento River Conservation Area would be designed to demonstrate and build on existing knowledge in that region about "wildlife friendly" agriculture. CALFED agencies will also seek to showcase

the store of existing voluntary habitat improvement work by agricultural producers, and facilitate the transfer of knowledge from that work to other landowners.

**4. Selection of habitat restoration and enhancement projects that minimize impacts to agricultural lands.** For projects that require acquisition of land interests, acquisition of fee title to land will be consistent with the adopted CALFED implementation plan for the affected region. Acquisitions will be from willing sellers only, and limited to situations where neither available public land nor partnerships are appropriate or cost-effective for the specific need. Decisions regarding such acquisitions will consider the potential for third party and redirected impacts. In addition, to the maximum extent possible, the CALFED agencies will seek to implement the program through technical and financial assistance to locally based, collaborative programs. Project proponents will state whether the proposed project is consistent with the local city or county general plan, and has local government support; and, whether the acquisition is time sensitive. Decisions to acquire interests in agricultural land will include consideration of potential impacts on neighboring agricultural operations. These considerations will help identify projects that will minimize the Ecosystem Restoration Program's impacts, as well as other CALFED programs' impacts, on agricultural lands.

Finally, when adverse impacts on agricultural land and water resources are unavoidable, CALFED agencies will adopt, where appropriate, measures, including the use of agricultural land conservation easements, to mitigate those impacts.

**5. Research and Monitoring.** The CALFED Program will assist in developing wildlife-friendly agricultural systems and practices, as well as in documenting the costs and benefits of such systems and practices compared to those of conventional agricultural systems. Research will also be pursued on the development and documentation of agriculture-friendly habitat restoration methods. Research will include such topics as which types of agricultural practices (e.g., rice fields, winter flooding, partial harvest) are "friendly" for which species, the ecological benefits of wildlife-friendly agriculture as compared to single-purpose habitat, and effective strategies to mitigate the impacts of habitat restoration on neighboring lands.

Similarly, the efficacy for achieving program goals via fee simple public acquisition and public management versus the use of agricultural conservation easements and private management, will be explored. Other research will address the testing of a model for use in evaluating acquisition impacts and priorities; the use of alternative crops (e.g., energy crops) that benefit wildlife; and, the environmental justice implications of agricultural land retirement in rural communities.

**6. In-lieu Property Taxes.** Local governments and non-profit organizations like water companies depend upon property taxes, special assessments, property fees, water charges, and other similar financing mechanisms to provide operating revenues. When land is acquired by a State or Federal agency, these taxes, assessments and fees are provided inconsistently or not at all. In some cases, State and Federal agencies are authorized to pay fees to local government agencies in-lieu of the usual assessments. The CALFED agencies will examine the application of State and Federal in-lieu tax requirements and subventions to CALFED projects, and will attempt to maximize the payment of in-lieu taxes and subventions, and consider other approaches to minimize CALFED impacts on local revenues, including the use of easements rather than fee simple acquisitions.