

Flood Protection Corridor Program Direct Expenditure Candidate Project Summary

Project Name: Mystic Lake Wetlands /Agri-Empire Property Acquisition

Primary Proponent: Wildlife Conservation Board

Total Project Cost: \$9.322 million for 1,197 acres.

Flood Protection Corridor Program Cost: \$5 million.

Other Funding Partners: WCB will furnish the balance of the cost of acquiring the property (\$4.322 million additional). Of this, WCB has already expended \$1.5 million and obtained a \$0.5 million donation from the property owner to acquire the 275-acre Forman property that adjoins the Agri-Empire property.

Project Summary: The Agri-Empire portion of the property totals 922 acres located adjacent to and east of the south end of the east side of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area (WLA). The property fronts on Bridge Street. The WLA is located in the San Jacinto Valley in Southern California, approximately 18 miles southeast of the City of Riverside. Immediately to the northwest is the City of Moreno Valley with a sphere of influence that wraps around the northern and northeastern borders of the wildlife area. The WLA is just under 8,000 acres in size and is contiguous to the 7,000-acre Lake Perris State Recreational Area. Initial land acquisition for the WLA began in 1981 as part of the mitigation package to compensate for wildlife habitat losses resulting from construction of the State Water Project. As opportunity, circumstances, and funding allowed, the Wildlife Conservation Board acquired additional properties on behalf of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to bring the WLA to its present size. These lands are presently managed by DFG for their plant and wildlife habitat value and for compatible public recreational use.

This proposal would be an expansion of the WLA, acquiring key holdings within the historic Mystic Lake bed as well as adjacent upland areas. The lowland areas of the property comprise the “historic sump” of the San Jacinto River that, in the past, formed an extensive freshwater wetland at this location. An early attempt at flood control diversion around this sump has largely deteriorated, and at the present time substantial flood flows often break out of the diversion and enter the historic lakebed. These “breaks” have occurred several times over the past decade and placement of these areas in public ownership will facilitate restoration of the historic flows back into the lakebed for wetland restoration.

Flood Benefits: The Riverside County Flood Control District is presently considering major flood control work downstream from the WLA. The proposed work involves elevation of the Ramona Expressway at the southern boundary of the WLA to form a dam-like structure resulting in additional ponding upstream. The newly elevated

roadway (Ramona Expressway) would only allow the passage of flood flows at the rate of 6,000 cfs while the 100-year flood event will generate flows of 60,000 cfs. The County's project relies on upstream landowners to provide an improved floodwater storage area. The upstream ponding area lands are largely within the natural floodplain of the San Jacinto River. The project will benefit downstream private landowners by removing much of their land from the floodplain reducing flood risk.

The project applicant alleges that placing the land in public ownership eliminates the problem of providing flood benefits to downstream property owners to the detriment of upstream owners. Using Mystic Lake for transitory storage is recommended in the County's Flood Control Master Plan for the Lower San Jacinto River Basin.

When subjected to a large flood event, Mystic Lake's flood control ponding area holds roughly 15,000 to 20,000 acre-feet of water. Currently the San Jacinto Valley (Mystic Lake drainage) is experiencing severe ground water over-drafting problems. Some of this water could be used for ground water replenishment. Also, to ensure the ponding area is drained each year to provide capacity for the following year's flood flows, water could be pumped upstream to a surface-level holding reservoir for water supply. To improve wildlife management of the WLA, the DFG could enter into agreements with other agencies to provide a minimum pool for wildlife throughout the year and water exchange (delivery of reclaimed water) in those years Mystic Lake is dry.

Wildlife Benefits: The wildlife area consists of both low-lying areas and upland areas. The low-lying areas within the floodplain of the San Jacinto River include examples of the alkali scrub, freshwater marsh, and southern willow scrub. The hills and "highland" areas surrounding the lowland floodplain are dominated by Riversidian sage scrub. Intermixed with the sage scrub community are patches of non-native grasslands that are found in both the upland and alkali flat areas. There are numerous sensitive plants associated with the Mystic Lake area, including the thread-leaved brodiaea (state listed endangered and Federally proposed threatened), San Jacinto saltbush and spreading navarretia (both Federally proposed threatened). The WLA and adjoining lands support 38 species of amphibians and reptiles. Mammal species are well represented and range from the desert shrew to the southern mule deer. The Stephens' kangaroo rat (state threatened and Federally endangered) is a resident mammal of the WLA.

More than 240 species of birds have been recorded on or adjacent to the WLA since 1982. Twenty-two over-wintering raptor species are known to utilize the San Jacinto Valley, including the osprey, Cooper's hawk, golden eagle and short-eared owl. Historically, the San Jacinto Valley has been an important Southern California wintering and nesting area for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl.

Agricultural Land Conservation Benefits: The site has been used for annual crops, possibly hay or grain. The DFG plans to preserve on 400 acres of the site agricultural activities that are compatible with wildlife enhancement and with flood flow easements.

Project Linkage to State Interests: Acquisition of the Agri-empire property would allow expansion of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area which was initially developed as mitigation for the Department of Water Resources' State Water Project. The project proponent is the Wildlife Conservation Board and project ownership would rest with California Department of Fish and Game. These three departments are all State agencies).

Status of Decision to Award FPCP Funds: Project is eligible for direct expenditure funds, and funding was recommended in 2001. The acquisition was completed in March 2002.

FPCP Project Evaluation Team Action: Ranked this project fifth of eleven evaluated.