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It takes teamwork: Partnerships bring habitat to farms and ranches

SLIDES

By Cory Golden | Enterprise staff writer | March 24, 2008 11:09



Environmental science students from Woodland High School install a drip irrigation system at Sheana and Lew Butler's farm near Madison on March 6 as part of the Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship program, or SLEWS. (Sue Cockrell/Enterprise photo)

'We'd bump elbows, step on toes and waste time and effort if we didn't work together and share resources,' said Paul Robins, executive director of the Yolo County Resource Conservation District.

While improving farm ponds, stream habitat and irrigation canal vegetation, the partnership aims to make on-farm conservation easier for landowners and create a model that can be used elsewhere.

A \$2.3 million CalFed grant, which in turn is being used to leverage further funding, is formalizing the group's effort and extending it from Yolo County to Solano County.

The Yolo RCD oversees the grant. It tackles the fees, permits, months of paperwork and monitoring of ecological and economic costs and benefits. Audubon California is designing and implementing the restoration projects.

MADISON - Cottonwood Slough has begun the transformation from irrigation ditch to something altogether more natural.

Its banks narrow and steep, lined with thistle, mustard and other noxious weeds, much of the channel has to be scraped regularly. It divides farm fields and it floods with winter storms, but it provides little refuge for birds or animals.

Someday, though, the slough may be ribbon of habitat flowing east with cottonwood, willow, sycamore, box elder and valley oak trees swaying above coyote brush, California blackberries, wild roses, wild rye, purple needle grass and deer grass.

For that to happen, it will take teamwork.

Lots of it.

For now, a half-mile stretch of the slough is being given new life by the Yolo-Solano Conservation Partnership.

The 10 partners bring together existing conservation programs bettering habitat on working farms and ranches.

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On a recent morning, along the south side of Cottonwood Slough, 19 environmental science students from Woodland High School worked to plant willow, cottonwood and mulefat cuttings, put up cages to protect them from beavers and install drip irrigation.

The students are taking part in the project through the Center for Land-Based Learning's Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship program, better known as SLEWS.

Their teacher, Jerry Delsol, said the time in the field cements what his students learn in the classroom. By taking his students to see SLEWS project sites of various ages in the area, 'they learn about the build-up of energy in an ecosystem and progression of life as the sites become more and more mature.'

Eating lunch before a writing activity, juniors Courtney Robinson and Kyle Goodner said they liked to imagine the birds and animals that might someday turn up here, among the trees they've planted.

'I love it out here,' Robinson said. 'I look forward to just being out here and hanging out with friends. It's a lot better than being stuck in class all day.'

The property they're working on is owned by and Sheana and Lew Butler. The Yolo RCD recently named them its 'cooperators of the year.'

'Strong backs'

Sheana Butler said the partnering conservation organizations provide technical know-how that makes a habitat project possible for landowners to try.

'Then you get all those bodies out here, all these high school kids,' she said.

'With strong backs,' Robins added.

'They've done an incredible job,' Sheana said.

Here the ground was re-graded and disked, creating a buffer of more than 40 feet from the channel - which on a recent day held just a shallow flow of ground water - to the Butlers' wheat field.

While the narrow ditch crumbled in on itself, creating a sort of sloping bench above the main channel eventually should cut down on maintenance and reduce flooding.

A seed drill was used to plant native grasses, whose deep roots will stabilize the soil, keeping less sediment from flowing downstream.

'This way you create something that's sustainable,' Robins said.

This particular project will cost about \$90,000, split between the CalFed grant, a Natural Resources Conservation Service grant and the Butlers themselves. The earth-moving was the largest single expense, at about \$25,000.

Besides the cost, turning the ground back to something resembling its natural state isn't a quick process, either - 'it takes three years on hand-holding, at least,' Robins said.

Across the slough, landowner Roy Parcell is taking part, too. The bench above the channel extends perhaps 15 feet toward his field. SLEWS students from Florin High School are helping to do the work on that side.

Wildlife habitat

Steve Rodriguez, ecosystem restoration program grants manager for the Bay Delta Region of the California Department of Fish and Game, said he liked the progress he saw at the site.

'This is sure looking impressive,' he said. 'We're excited about working with landowners to expand habitat on working farms. We

hope that, in the end, the wildlife will use it. It's easy to imagine an incredible diversity of bird species utilizing this spot, along with some small mammals and maybe some large mammals too.'

What the Butlers and Parcell are doing will be a model that can be shown to other landowners and the public. The conservation partnership is talking to farmers upstream, hoping to sell them on extending the restoration work.

The Butlers, who have also preserved nearby land through a conservation easement, said they've found habitat projects deeply rewarding.

'There's an old saying that old men ought to plant trees they'll never sit under,' Lew said. 'But now I'm sitting under trees I planted 13 years ago.'

Work by the partners is also planned for the Jepson Prairie-Prospect Island corridor in Solano County, along other Yolo County waterways and on privately owned parcels in the Yolo Bypass.

Other partners are the Solano Resource Conservation District, biologists Peter Moyle of UC Davis and Glen Wylie of the U.S. Geological Service, the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, Defenders of Wildlife, the Solano Land Trust and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service

Partnerships

While the group may sound like 'a bit of a 10-headed beast,' Robins said it capitalizes on long-standing relationships between local nonprofit and governmental organizations.

Lew Butler said that, in this area, landowners, agencies, nonprofits and experts all team up unusually well.

'Stuff happens here that just doesn't happen any other place,' he said - something Robins credits not just to the quality of the support services, but to political will.

Other bodies, like Yolo County, the Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee, Putah Creek Council and the Yolo Natural Heritage Program, may join the partnership for future projects, Robins said.

Together, he said, all hope to shine a light on the importance of working farms and ranches for wildlife, water quality and quality of life.

'Hopefully it will build more public support for maintaining lands that are special. We can't turn back time and bring back all the wetlands, but we can go back to what works.'

- On the Net: <http://www.yolorcd.org/>, <http://ca.audubon.org/lsp/>, <http://landbasedlearning.org/>

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