



TO: Campbell Ingram, Executive Director, Delta Conservancy  
Erik Vink, Executive Director, Delta Protection Commission  
Mark Biddlecomb, Director, Western Regional Office, Ducks Unlimited

From: Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership – a collaboration of Audubon California, Point Blue Conservation Science and The Nature Conservancy

Date: 1 June 2016

Re: Your Contributions to and Results of Waterbird Habitat Enhancement Program (WHEP) Expansion into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta

Dear Partners,

We sincerely appreciate your efforts to support the expansion of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Waterbird Habitat Enhancement Program in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta). Your contributions, together with our own recruitment efforts, resulted in engaging farmers about the program through workshops (16 producers), and visits to NRCS field offices (five producers). We could not have achieved this level of engagement without your help. In this letter, we report the results of our efforts to recruit Delta farmers to participate in WHEP, and we seek your feedback on this program as well as the future of bird-friendly farming in the Delta.

The goal of this project was to introduce farmers to and increase the implementation of bird- and farm-friendly practices in the Delta using the WHEP model that was established in the Sacramento Valley, where it has provided over 120,000 acres of agricultural land enhanced for birds since 2011. To expand WHEP into the Delta, the Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership (MBCP) worked with NRCS to broaden both the suite of practices offered and geographic scope of the program. We created additional practices that were better suited to Delta crops and farming practices while still providing benefits to shorebirds, waterfowl and other waterbirds, including Sandhill Cranes. Focal counties for program expansion included Contra Costa, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Solano, and Yolo.

Our outreach effort to Delta farmers was extensive. The MBCP leveraged private funds to provide outreach and technical support to NRCS for WHEP practices. Your existing network contributed greatly to this effort. We led two workshops to engage local producers where we explained the technical aspects and the conservation context of each practice. To engage farmers and encourage attendance at the workshops, we made direct phone calls to over 160 farmers and landowners and nearly 80 Reclamation Districts followed by formal letters with information about the program and associated workshops. In addition, we visited, left flyers at and made phone calls to nearly 50 locations throughout the Delta including regional Resource Conservation Districts, Farm Bureaus and County Agricultural Commissioners to further advertise the workshops and program. We gave presentations to the Board of the Solano Resource Conservation District and to the Board of the Delta Conservancy. We published two articles in the Delta Conservancy's newsletter and distributed a press release through NRCS advertising the workshops.

We encountered a mixed reaction to WHEP in the Delta. Although farmers expressed interest in the program through attendance at workshops (16 producers), personal conversations (many producers), and visits to NRCS field offices (five producers), overall enrollment was low. Applications for over 5,700 acres, of which 2,603 acres were funded with WHEP contracts were received by NRCS yet none of the acres were in the Delta. The MBCP field-tested each of the practices with the help of farmers in the Delta prior to expanding the program, however, feedback from farmers suggests they would have liked even more involvement in the development of the practices to better reflect the diversity of farming challenges in the Delta. In addition, Delta pumping restrictions, the exceptional drought, and voluntary water use reductions limited farmers' ability to participate. Nonetheless, we are optimistic that additional collaborative efforts to implement bird-friendly agricultural practices holds great promise in the Delta.

The MBCP is committed to the sustainability of waterbird populations by working with farmers to implement bird-friendly management practices in the Central Valley of California and contributing to the conservation objectives as set by the Central Valley Joint Venture. Bird-friendly farming is an important way to provide habitat while supporting the livelihoods of farmers in the Delta and mitigating impacts from drought and a changing climate. Building alliances between the farming and conservation communities has been a helpful strategy for advocating for joint resource needs.

We sincerely appreciate your efforts to support the expansion of WHEP in the Delta. In the absence of a centralized producer organization capable of reaching out to growers on a large scale, your participation was invaluable. Funding for WHEP in the Delta is still available through regional and state NRCS funding pools though the national source used for this expansion is no longer available. We believe it is a worthwhile opportunity to implement bird-friendly agricultural practices in the Delta and we are carefully considering feedback from farmers with regard to practice development. We would also like to hear feedback from you on the project and the future of bird-friendly farming in the Delta.

Please let us know if you have any questions or would like for us to provide additional program information to your staff or board. We look forward to continuing our work with you in the Delta in the future.

Sincerely,



Khara Strum

On behalf of the Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership