



SACRAMENTO - SAN JOAQUIN

**DELTA CONSERVANCY**

A California State Agency



# Proposition 1 Grant Program

## 2015-16 Staff Recommendation

### I. Project Overview

<b>Project Title</b>	Habitat Enhancement for Swainson’s Hawk at Elliott Ranch		
<b>Applicant</b>	Environmental Defense Fund		
<b>Project Number</b>	Prop 1-Y1-2015-014	<b>Category</b>	2
<b>County</b>	Yolo	<b>Funding Request</b>	\$378,308
<b>Score</b>	85.4	<b>Total Project Cost</b>	\$559,074
<b>Staff Recommendation:</b>	Determination that the project is categorically exempt from CEQA, and approval of funds conditional upon extension of monitoring to 15 years; verification of adequate water rights for the project; and receipt and approval of landowner contract.	<b>Funding Recommended</b>	\$378,308

### II. Staff Recommendations

Delta Conservancy staff recommends that the Board conditionally approve funding for the Habitat Enhancement for Swainson’s Hawk at Elliott Ranch project (#Prop 1-Y1-2015-014) proposed by the Environmental Defense Fund. Approval of the funding is conditional upon the following: (1) proof of water rights for irrigation purposes; (2) increasing the monitoring timeline from 10 years, as currently outlined in the proposal, to 15 years, to ensure compliance with the general bond obligation law (Gov. Code 16.725); and (3) receipt and approval of the contract with the landowner. Conservancy staff anticipates receiving the items above by August 2016. Staff also recommends that the Board determine that the project is categorically exempt from environmental review pursuant to CEQA

The Habitat Enhancement for Swainson’s hawk at Elliott Ranch project proposes to create meaningful habitat outcomes for Swainson’s hawk, a state-listed species, in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta by partnering with a private landowner interested in habitat conservation that maintains agriculture productivity. This restoration effort will generate: (1) 188 acres of functional Swainson’s Hawk habitat, representing 159 habitat acres of enhanced above baseline conditions, and 29 acres of habitat that are already high quality

foraging habitat that will be maintained as such; and (2) six acres of hedgerows created and maintained for the benefit of prey for Swainson's Hawk and for beneficial insect communities. The project will be integrated into the landowner's agricultural operation, and will be maintained by the landowner for a specified number of years (10 years has been proposed by the applicant; the Delta Conservancy is requesting to extend that to 15 years). Habitat values created in Year 1 of the project will be maintained throughout the term of the project, providing much-needed habitat for a listed species without removing land from production or limiting private property rights.

The project is ready for implementation; it is well-supported locally and is being advanced by a consortium of non-profit organizations working together as the Central Valley Habitat Exchange, as well as county supervisors and local landowners. The project team has thoroughly vetted the scientific foundation of the project, drawing on extensive literature review and expert consultation to create the innovative Habitat Quantification Tool that is being used to quantify the habitat improvements of the project and to adaptively manage its outcomes. Based on modelling and mapping submitted by the applicant, Yolo County is an area where habitat restoration and enhancement for Swainson's hawks, such as that proposed by this project, is an especially high priority in the face of a changing climate.

This project is well-designed and will be shovel ready upon execution of the grant agreement. Project proponents are advancing an innovative means of implementing and quantifying habitat creation by working within the agricultural landscape to carefully measure key habitat parameters. These characteristics make this project a standard-bearer for multibenefit upland habitat enhancement in the Delta. By approving this project, the Conservancy will be funding a project with important ecosystem benefits and a high likelihood of success.

Staff has prepared the text and tables below based on staff's best understanding of the information provided in the application. The Conservancy has received comments on the proposal from the Delta Stewardship Council and the Delta Protection Commission. If approved, staff will work with the applicant to further refine the project's scope of work and performance measures, and to address comments prior to entering into a grant agreement.

### **III. Project Summary**

#### **Project Description:**

This project proposes to improve breeding and foraging habitat for Swainson's hawks on the Elliott Ranch in Yolo County. This project is being advanced by the Environmental Defense Fund and partners, including Stillwater Sciences, California Agricultural Properties, Inc., and the landowner. The project is consistent with the Delta Conservancy's Proposition 1 grant program in that it involves voluntary landowner participation in the restoration of important species and habitats within the legal Delta.

This project will be conducted on private working lands with the support of a conservation-minded landowner. The project site is contiguous to, and integrated with, Yolo County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) properties. While this property is consistent with the Yolo HCP, it is not serving as mitigation and therefore is eligible for Proposition 1 funds. Yolo

County has been identified as a high priority area for Swainson’s hawk habitat restoration due to its predicted stability in the face of climate change. The project site consists of 300 acres of low- to moderate-quality habitat for Swainson’s Hawks. This restoration effort will be based on a contract with the landowner that will commit the landowner to generate: (1) 188 acres of functional Swainson’s hawk habitat, representing 159 acres of habitat enhanced above baseline conditions, and 29 acres of habitat that are already high quality foraging habitat that will be maintained as such; and (2) six acres of hedgerows created and maintained for the benefit of Swainson’s hawk prey and for beneficial insect populations. The project, including the crop conversion, will be integrated into the landowner’s agricultural operations, and will be maintained by the landowner for a specified number of years (10 years have been proposed by the applicant, the Delta Conservancy is requesting that be extended to 15 years). By converting melon and safflower fields to flood irrigated pastures, and by planting hedgerows along field edges, this project will enhance habitat for a listed species in a priority restoration area. The proposed schedule indicates that implementation of this project can begin as soon as funds are made available, and the construction of the project will be finished in 2017. This will be followed by monitoring that will occur annually for the first three years after implementation, and then regularly until year 15.

**Location (Site Description):**

The 1,000-acre Elliott Ranch is a privately owned farm in Yolo County just south of the City of West Sacramento and just east of the Sacramento Deep Water Shipping Channel. This project will take place on the northern-most 300 acres of the farm. This land is currently being used to grow row crops such as melons, grain, and safflower. Riparian woodland runs along South Fork Putah Creek to the east of the property. There are several other tree groves and tree rows in the one-mile buffer around the property. An agreement with the landowner confirming the right to do the project will be provided as a condition of approval of funding.

**IV. Implementation of California Water Action Plan and Consistency with Prop 1 and Conservancy Enabling Legislation**

State Priority/Plan	Action	Project Benefits
Proposition 1	Ch. 6 79732(a)(2) Implement watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on California’s communities and ecosystem.	Creates 188 acres of high quality Swainson’s Hawk habitat in Yolo County. Based on modelling and mapping submitted by the applicant, Yolo County is an area where habitat restoration and enhancement for Swainson’s Hawks, such as that proposed by this project, is an especially high priority in the face of a changing climate.

State Priority/Plan	Action	Project Benefits
Proposition 1	Ch. 6 79732(a)(4) Protect and restore aquatic, wetland, and migratory bird ecosystems, including fish and wildlife corridors and the acquisition of water rights for instream flow.	Creates 188 acres high quality Swainson's Hawk habitat. The Swainson's hawk is a migratory bird that is listed as threatened by the State of California.
	Ch. 6 79732(a)(12) Assist in the recovery of endangered, threatened, or migratory species by improving watershed health, instream flows, fish passage, coastal or inland wetland restoration, or other means, such as natural community conservation plan and habitat conservation plan implementation.	The restored habitat will benefit the state listed Swainson's Hawk. This project is also adjacent to, and incorporated with, the Yolo County HCP/NCCP. While this property is consistent with the Yolo HCP, it is not serving as mitigation and therefore is eligible for Prop. 1 funds.
California Water Action Plan	Action 3. Achieve the co-equal goals for the Delta.	Restores Delta ecosystems.
	Action 4. Protect and restore important ecosystems.	Protects and restores the ecosystem (specifically the breeding and foraging habitat) of an important species.
Delta Conservancy Enabling Legislation	§32301(i)(1) Protect and enhance habitat and restoration.	Restores 188 acres of Swainson's Hawk habitat and six acres of native hedgerow.
	§32301(i)(6) Restore the region's physical and living resources.	Restores upland habitat to a more natural state both physically and biologically.
	§32301(i)(7) Assist locals with NCCPs.	Supports local HCP/NCCP efforts. While this property is consistent with the Yolo HCP, it is not serving as mitigation and therefore is eligible for Prop. 1 funds.
Delta Conservancy Strategic Plan	Objective 3.2. Lead Delta ecosystem restoration activities consistent with Conservancy authorities, the Delta Plan and other regional plans and guidance, through a voluntary Delta Restoration Network, and based on adaptive management. Strategy 3.2.3: Protect and enhance wetland and upland habitats on subsided lands, as consistent with agricultural operations.	Establishes and maintains 188 acres of upland habitat in the form of pasture and native hedgerow vegetation that will serve as high quality breeding and foraging habitat for Swainson's Hawks and that will benefit numerous other species.

<b>State Priority/Plan</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Project Benefits</b>
Delta Plan	ER P2. Restore habitats at appropriate elevations.	Converts 188 acres of row crops into flood irrigated pastures and native hedgerows for Swainson's hawk. Yolo County has been identified as a priority area for Swainson's Hawk conservation due to appropriate geographic characteristics such as elevation and it predicted resilience to climate change.
	ER R2. Prioritize and implement projects that restore Delta habitat.	Restores 188 acres of Delta habitat to a more natural state.
	DR-R10. Encourage Wildlife-friendly Farming.	Restores 188 acres of row crops to flood irrigated pasture and native hedgerow vegetation. This property will be used both as Swainson's Hawk habitat and as grazing land.

## V. Outcomes/Outputs

<b>Project Goals</b>	<b>Desired Project Outcomes</b>	<b>Output Indicators</b>
Goal 1. Create meaningful habitat outcomes for Swainson's Hawk, a state-listed species, in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta by partnering with a private working landowner interested in voluntary habitat conservation that maintains agriculture productivity, and by using a scientifically rigorous and consistent method to maximize habitat restoration outcomes.	Functional acres of Swainson's Hawk habitat created, evaluated and protected.	Acres restored. HQT pre- and post-restoration assessments completed. Management and crop conversion plans completed.
Goal 2. Ensure durable, verified and sustainable habitat outcomes by maintaining benefits for Swainson's Hawk over the full 10 year contract term by tracking and reporting on functional acres over time, and using a clear and actionable management plan, landowner contract, and financial assurance package.	Habitat values maintained on-site, and a defined adaptive management process is implemented to share lessons learned and manage the site over time.	Management Plan completed. Participant contract completed. Financial assurance package completed. Verification reports completed and submitted in Years 5, 10 and 15 (to be requested) of the contract agreement.

Project Goals	Desired Project Outcomes	Output Indicators
Goal 3. Maintain or increase economic and habitat values on a working North Delta farm through crop conversion and management.	Revenue opportunity for working agricultural lands, while also increasing habitat value for at-risk species.	Crop conversion plan completed. Irrigated pasture land managed for income.
Goal 4. Understand habitat value provided on-site for species beyond Swainson's Hawk, and explore a multi-species parcel evaluation approach.	Understanding of functional habitat for pollinator species, such as Monarch butterfly, provided as a co-benefit to Swainson's Hawk restoration.	Hedgerows planted. HQT assessments completed.

## VI. Budget

The total cost for this project is \$559,074. The Delta Conservancy is being asked to provide \$378,308. The remainder will come from the Environmental Defense Fund, providing a cost share of \$173,066 (cash), and California Agriculture Properties, Inc., providing a cost share of \$7,700 (in-kind).

## VII. Consistency with Grant Program Guidelines

### Readiness (Including CEQA Status if Applicable):

The applicant effectively demonstrates that this category 2 implementation project is set to begin in the fall of 2016 and will be completed in fall of 2019. If there are no issues with water rights or extending the monitoring term, the project is ready to begin as soon as funds are made available. The pre-project site assessment was completed by Stillwater Sciences and the applicants have contracted with Stillwater Sciences to develop a planting plan and post-project third party monitoring. The applicants have contracted with California Agricultural Properties, Inc. to develop a crop conversion plan. The landowner is intent on pursuing implementation of the project.

This habitat enhancement project is categorically exempt from the provisions of CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations sections 15304 and 15378. Because the award of funds is for new gardening or landscaping or normal agricultural maintenance activities, the award is exempt from CEQA. Further, none of the exceptions to the exemptions identified in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15300.2 apply. Staff, therefore, recommends that the Board determine that the project is categorically exempt from CEQA.

### Local Support:

This project has strong local support from the community. The project received support letters from Yolo County Supervisor Oscar Villegas, the property owner, and the owner of the only adjoining property. This effort is consistent with similar efforts in Yolo County and has already been incorporated into the Yolo HCP/NCCP. A county resolution was not included. Applicants consulted with the Delta Protection Commission.

**Scientific Merit:**

The scientific merit of this proposal is well supported. The Swainson's hawk Habitat Quantification Tool (HQT) is an innovative use of the best available scientific knowledge and practices to track impact (positive and negative) to Swainson's hawk habitat in the Delta. The HQT has been developed through review of the scientific literature on Swainson's hawk habitat needs and consultation with a broad group of Swainson's hawk experts with experience in the Central Valley. Stillwater Sciences was the lead developer of the HQT. The tool has been field-tested on working lands in California, reviewed, and modified with input from a Technical Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Water Resources, Audubon, Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, Point Blue Conservation Science, and private consultants.

**Long Term Management & Adaptive Management Plan:**

The applicant lays out a clear approach for a 10-year management plan that is supported by the project's monitoring plan and allows for adaptive management of the site. Per the general bond obligation, monitoring should be sustained for 15 years. The Conservancy will work with the applicant to expand the monitoring for an additional five years, applying the same management and monitoring principles outlined in their proposal. The proposal clearly explains plans for long-term management and sustainability beyond the term of the grant: the landowner will be responsible for managing the habitat that has been created for the duration of the contract with the landowner, and the project team will assess the habitat quality regularly using the HQT.

The proposal lays out a clear adaptive management plan using the Plan-Do-Evaluate-Respond approach. The project team will conduct an on-site HQT assessment following project implementation to confirm final habitat function scores, and adjust the management plans as needed to generate and maintain expected post-project habitat function. The management plans will also be adapted based on the results of HQT monitoring in years five and ten. Stillwater Sciences will perform third-party monitoring of the project each of the three years following project implementation. This will include one site visit per year and a report on native plant species density, weed cover, and other pertinent observations on site conditions. These observations and evaluations will provide EDF and the landowner with the information needed to make management or maintenance changes to ensure the site is meeting the expected post-project functional habitat target.

**Monitoring and Assessment:**

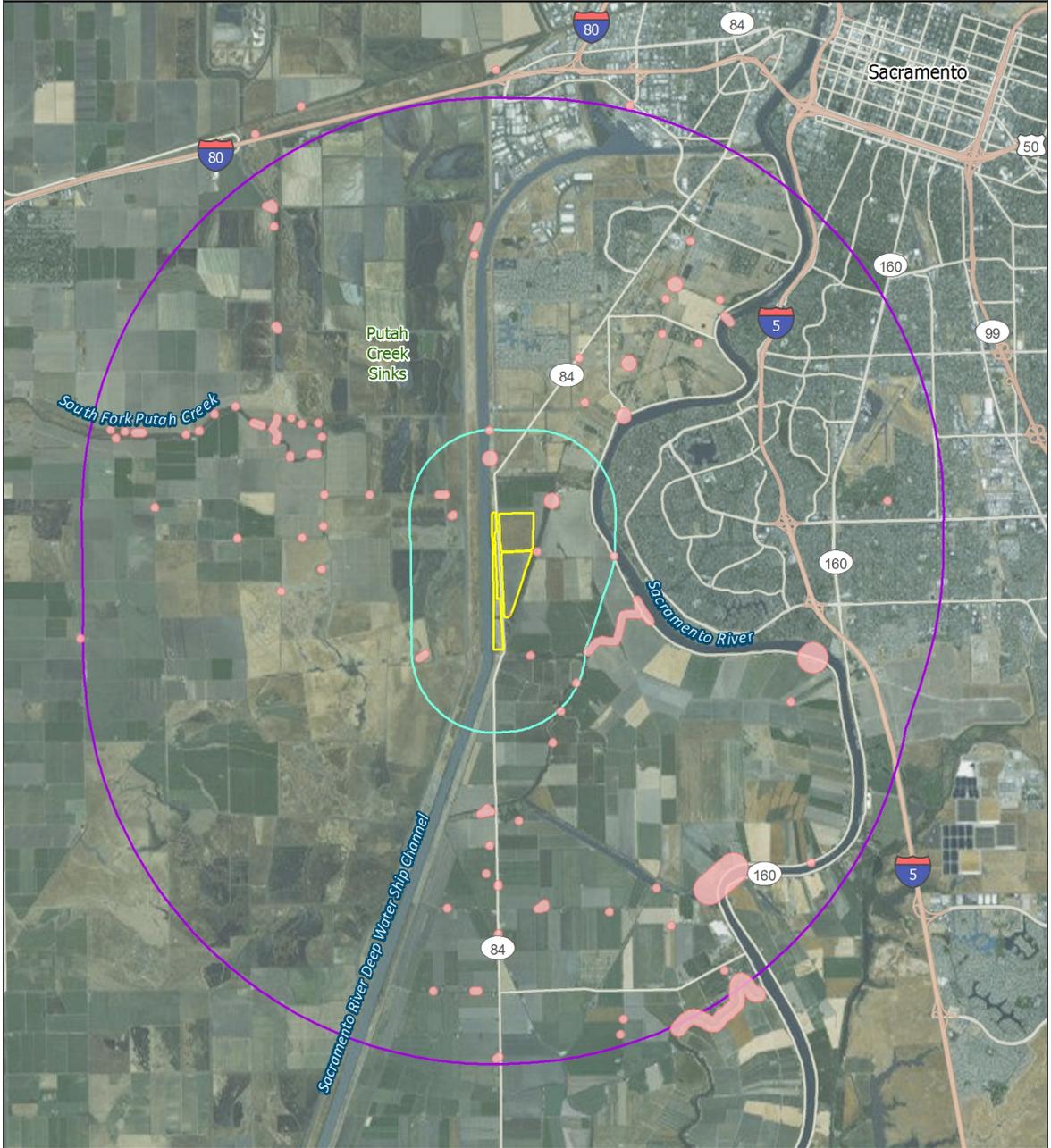
The applicant will use the innovative Habitat Quantification Tool to monitor the project. The Swainson's hawk HQT enables quantification, verification, and tracking of improvements in Swainson's hawk habitat on existing working lands. The HQT uses the average of three scores given to aspects of a landscape: (1) the function and value of the surrounding landscape, (2) nesting habitat; and (3) foraging habitat. This average allows for a quantitative measure of the suitability of an area for Swainson's hawks. These scores can then be compared to other scores to assess the relative quality of habitats across a landscape.

Third-party pre-project monitoring has already been conducted. EDF is funding HQT assessment in years five and ten, and then, as proposed here, regularly until year 15 to comply with the general bond obligation (California Government Code 16.725). The HQT reports will be used to determine whether the projected functional acres of habitat to be created by the restoration plan have been maintained.

**Climate Change Considerations:**

Based on modelling and mapping submitted by the applicant, Yolo County is an area where habitat restoration and enhancement for Swainson's hawks is an especially high priority in the face of a changing climate. Because habitat is likely to remain stable despite a changing climate, Yolo County is a good place to create habitat for Swainson's hawk so that they can withstand climate change effects.

CENTRAL VALLEY HABITAT EXCHANGE

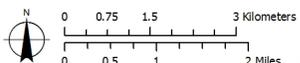


Elliott Ranch- 5 Mile Buffer

-  SWHA occurrences within the last 10 years\*
-  Elliott Ranch Fields
-  1 mile buffer
-  5 mile buffer

Map Sources:  
 Elliott Ranch, Buffers: Stillwater  
 Sciences. Imagery, Roads,  
 Cities: ESRI. SWHA occurrences:  
 CNDDB Nov, 2014

**\*CNDDB data is confidential**



Map Location

