

ACTION

8

Protect, restore, and enhance seasonal wetlands

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Protect and enhance seasonal wetlands within the region using conservation easements, related protection tools, and improved grazing management practices.

TASK 8-1 Re-establish the Interagency Vernal Pool Stewardship Initiative among state and federal agencies. Build relationships through the Initiative with land trusts and conservancies, landowners, Resource Conservation Districts, and municipalities to coordinate planning efforts.

BY 2017 Re-establish Vernal Pool Stewardship Initiative.

TASK 8-2 Through the Initiative, leverage funding and investments to protect targeted vernal pools.

BY 2021 Protect at least 300 acres of vernal pool landscapes in the San Francisco Bay region and an additional 500 acres in the Delta Region.

TASK 8-3 Develop a white paper on best practices for grazing management to protect seasonal wetlands and enhance habitat quality.

BY 2018 Complete white paper.

BACKGROUND

Seasonal wetlands can be found in both upland areas and on former baylands. These types of wetlands are called “seasonal” because they periodically flood or fill with rain, runoff, or groundwater. Seasonal wetlands have soils and plant species characteristic of a continuum of salinity regimes (from salty to fresh).

Seasonal wetlands may be former tidal marshes that have been closed off from tidal action by the construction of dikes and levees. With each year’s winter rains, these low-lying areas fill with fresh water, and then slowly dry out after the rainy season ends. Salt grass, bulrush, and cattails near the Bay are species typically found in seasonal wetlands. Other depressions in upland areas where saline soils support marsh species may also be seasonal wetlands. Basins in relatively flat areas or on gently rolling ground are typically wetlands and may be labeled vernal pools, seasonal wetlands or marshes, or wet meadows. They typically consist of seeps, wet soils, and pools. These habitats may host large numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds during the winter and spring migratory periods, and support rare or endangered plants and invertebrates.

Seasonal wetlands can co-exist with ranchers but are threatened by conversion to orchards, vineyards, and other land uses. Studies show cattle grazing can keep non-native grasses from crowding out native grasses and drying out areas where water collects. Employing

best grazing practices can help sustain ranching communities and retain species diversity.

Efforts to conserve one type of seasonal wetland, vernal pool complexes, have lagged behind the region’s collective work on other important aquatic and riparian habitats. As wetlands, vernal pools are protected by state and federal laws, and many of the plants and animals they support (including significant numbers of shorebirds) are listed or special status species. The SF Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board’s *Conditional Waiver of Waste Discharge Requirements for Grazing Operations in the Napa River and Sonoma Creek Watersheds* (2011) requires rangeland managers to minimize delivery of sediment, pathogens, and nutrients from ranching lands and animal use areas into state waters, including implementation of best management practices to provide protection for vernal pools.

Despite these regulatory steps, the loss and fragmentation of vernal pools remain the most serious threats to the survival and recovery of sensitive species as identified in the *Vernal Pool Recovery Plan* issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1996, federal and state agencies convened the Interagency Vernal Pool Stewardship Initiative to collaborate in the conservation of vernal pools. In partnership with land trusts, Resource Conservation Districts, and stewardship-minded landowners, tens of thousands of acres of vernal pool landscapes were permanently protected within the Eastern Delta and targeted areas within the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. Personnel changes at the agencies leading the Initiative, however, led to its suspension (though it was never intentionally disbanded). This CCMP action supports the re-establishment of the Initiative to facilitate interagency and public-private collaboration around vernal pool protection in a manner that promotes sustainable grazing and livestock production.

OWNERS

SF Bay Joint Venture (Tasks 8-2, 8-3)

SF Estuary Partnership (Task 8-1)

COLLABORATING PARTNERS

Resource Conservation Districts, SF Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, SF Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, Sonoma Land Trust, US Environmental Protection Agency

NEXUS

Actions 1-9, 11, 12, 14, 15

Goal 1

Objectives a, b

