



## Legislation Text

**File #:** 17-561, **Version:** 1

Receive summary reports and presentations on two studies and related work prepared under a \$228,000 grant from the Delta Conservancy (#2016-17-106) consisting of a Countywide Agricultural Economic Baseline Assessment and Cache Slough Case Study, and a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) Study for the Cache Slough region of the County

Published Notice Required? Yes ☐ No ☒  
Public Hearing Required? Yes ☐ No ☒

### **DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATION:**

The Department of Resource Management recommends that the Board receive reports on the completion of two studies and related activities undertaken as part of Agreement number 2016-17-106 with the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy for the Cache Slough region. The two studies include a Countywide Agricultural Economic Baseline Assessment and Cache Slough Case Study, and a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) Study. The Economic Assessment Study will be presented by the Agricultural Commissioner, as part of his report under a separate agenda item. Executive Summaries of the studies are attached to each of the respective Board Reports. An overview of the LESA study will be presented by Wendy Rash, Natural Resources Conservation Service; Genevieve Taylor, Ag Innovations; and Anna Constantino, FlowWest.

### **SUMMARY:**

On September 1, 2016, the County entered into a contract agreement with the State Delta Conservancy to receive planning grant funds in the amount of \$228,000 to conduct data acquisition & mapping; stakeholder outreach; and land use and economic studies in the Cache Slough region of the County. The eastern areas of the County in the Yolo Bypass and Cache Slough as well as adjacent areas have been the subject of intense interest by the State as an opportunity area for ecosystem restoration and for flood risk reduction purposes, including mitigation for the State and federal water project Biological Opinions (BiOps) and the proposed California WaterFix Project. For at least the past decade, the State has been actively pursuing and acquiring lands in the region, most recently through third party ecosystem developers. Up to this point there has been a lack of information on the Cache Slough region, creating an impediment to fully understanding impacts of large-scale ecosystem restoration activities and effective mitigation strategies, including unintended consequences, such as potential nuisance activities putting a strain on County services, and fragmented agricultural systems. The studies and related work provides further information and understanding of the Cache Slough region and assists the County in negotiation with the state in attempting to mitigate these impacts.

The Contract Agreement and funding allowed for four primary works to be completed: 1) a data acquisition and GIS mapping series, 2) a concerted outreach effort to landowners and other stakeholders in the region, 3) a Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) Study and 4) a Countywide Agriculture Baseline Assessment and Cache Slough Case Study. This funding allowed the County to develop a great deal of information on infrastructure, land use and particularly agriculture in the region; to build relationships with landowners and others, learn how landowners value the land; and to begin to understand the physical and economic consequences to the region from ecosystem restoration activities. The two studies completed as part of this process will be the focus of the presentations to the Board. The LESA Study lead, Wendy Rash of the Natural

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and others will present the LESA report. The Countywide Economic Assessment and Cache Slough Case Study will be presented by the Agricultural Commissioner as part of a separate agenda item.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

A grant of \$228,000 was provided by the Delta Conservancy to conduct the studies, mapping and outreach activities. There were no General Fund impacts other than staff time, some of which was provided as a local match. Should the process continue in some form (there is an effort to begin a Phase 2 process and the County is considering next steps) any recommendations would be the subject of another Board report (and attendant action) at a future date.

### **DISCUSSION:**

Because of its desirable geographic location, lack of urban development and appropriate elevations for tidal and related upland restoration activities, the Cache Slough Region (as well as adjacent lands and other areas such as the Suisun Marsh) have been a primary focus of tidal and related ecosystem restoration efforts for well over a decade. UC Davis describes a 'North Delta Arc', which includes Cache Slough, Suisun Marsh and surrounding areas as the most desirable (and perhaps the only remaining) area in which to save endangered native fish species. Efforts to acquire and convert agricultural lands are gaining momentum due to State and federal water project mitigation requirement deadlines, new acquisition strategies, available funding for projects and a host of broader agency programs to develop habitat acreages and adaptively manage them.

Existing land uses are primarily agricultural in the Cache Slough region and would be directly and indirectly affected by the conversion of agricultural lands to tidal and related habitat. Remaining ag lands would suffer by proximity to restored lands, including complications associated with the presence of endangered species. Infrastructure of all kinds, including water supply and quality for agriculture and municipal & industrial water uses would be affected. To date, the piecemeal acquisition by the state does not allow for mitigation or assurances for agencies or landowners, and the County may be affected by the loss of tax dollars, potentially incurring additional responsibility for vacant lands, such as Sheriff's services to deal with nuisance activities in unincorporated areas. In addition, the Yolo Bypass and Cache Slough are a focus of efforts to increase flood capacity and retention of flood water in the region. As a result, the region would greatly benefit from a more comprehensive planning approach that incorporates flood, ecosystem and land use elements.

To date it has been difficult to devise a strategy to protect ag lands from fragmentation, to devise appropriate mitigation for impacts to agriculture and existing infrastructure and fully understand cumulative impacts to the region, because little data exists by which to identify and quantify impacts. The Conservancy funding provided the County the opportunity to study agriculture economic and infrastructure issues that had been studied previously, but not at such a comprehensive level. The funding provided by the Conservancy has enabled the County to develop data, maps and information that will allow for meaningful dialogue with the state over competing land uses and how to plan for the region over time while protecting existing land uses. The information helps quantify impacts and develop meaningful mitigation strategies for agriculture, water supply and other affected land uses. The combination of data acquisition/mapping, outreach and studies have provided the County a more comprehensive information base and will allow for a largely absent cumulative assessment of impacts to the region, to ultimately help enable the sustainability of agriculture and the protection of key infrastructure. Where a wealth of information has been developed in ecosystem restoration and flood risk reduction planning, little information has historically been available to make the case for protection of existing land uses and agriculture, and for identification and subsequent mitigation of impacts in this area. As a result, little mitigation for impacts to agriculture have occurred with land acquisition and resultant changing land uses in the region. The new information provides a baseline that will assist the County in advocating for a broader plan for the Cache Slough area. However, it remains to be seen if the State will support such a plan.

The Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Study (LESA) process led by the NRCS involved a close collaboration with landowners to articulate shared values for the region, and development of a model. The process revealed that water rights in the region are among the best in the State; and climate, soils and proximity to markets result in lands that are impossible to replicate elsewhere. The data and mapping work resulted in printed map sets and development of new data for land use, ecosystem, flood, key water supply infrastructure, as well as a 'heat map' showing LESA values. The County will have access to databases developed by the Conservancy and the San Francisco Estuary Institute. We now have a regular meeting process with our landowners and have begun to quantify direct, indirect and induced impacts associated with the loss of agricultural land in the region through the Economic Assessment Study.

The Delta Conservancy conducted a broader, concurrent, agency-driven process (of which the County land use work was part) which included facilitated monthly meetings with the County and its local partners, many other involved state agencies and a number of organizations and contractors involved in ecosystem restoration activities. While ecosystem driven, the broader effort brought detailed information relative to ecosystem, water infrastructure, flood and land use/agriculture together, to elicit a level of greater understanding among participants in each topic area. The facilitated effort was considered a Phase 1 pilot process to see if ultimately, some level of consensus could be reached on a plan for the region as part of a Phase 2 effort, and to duplicate this process in other areas of the Delta.

The Phase 1 work will be key in development of next step plans for the region as the County grapples with additional acquisition and conversion projects on the horizon. The broader Conservancy process has been helpful, providing an opportunity to educate other agencies and organizations about the value of agriculture and the importance of infrastructure in the region, (among many other things). With the other agencies, County staff are identifying possible next steps for the process, including a possible Phase 2 effort with the Conservancy, or a broader collaborative effort that pulls in all of the relevant regulatory agencies, for a more formally structured plan process, similar to planning done for the Suisun Marsh.

### **ALTERNATIVES:**

The Board may choose not to hear the report, but this is not recommended as the study work contains a great deal of useful information and is the culmination of work by a number of agencies.

### **OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:**

There were high levels of interaction with agencies, organizations and individuals throughout the process. The County's work involved many of our local partners, including SCWA, RD 2068, the Solano Land Trust, the Solano RCD, Dixon RCD, Yolo County and many individual landowners. Our federal partner, the NRCS led the LESA study process.

The Conservancy process has engendered the interest of many State agencies including the Delta Stewardship Council, Natural Resources Agency, Department of Water Resources, Department of Fish & Wildlife, San Francisco Estuary Institute and UC Davis, among others.

### **CAO RECOMMENDATION:**

**APPROVE DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION**