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Dear Juliana,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the eligible projects, public benefits, and public trust draft documents discussed at the May 4th Stakeholder Advisory Committee meeting. The organizations signing this letter wish to provide comments specifically related to the Ecosystems Improvements language in the public benefits draft document under consideration by the California Water Commission.

With 95% of native wetlands now destroyed, California's public refuges (state and federal) now provide the backbone of the state's wetlands ecosystem. However, the system relies heavily on a partnership of public and private lands, including privately managed wetlands and habitat friendly winter flooded agriculture, in order to meet the Central Valley Joint Venture (CVJV) objectives identified in the CVJV 2006 Implementation Plan. This public private partnership is critical to restoring healthy and abundant migratory waterbird populations in the Central Valley.

In an average non-drought year, approximately 70,000 acres are publically managed wetlands, 140,000 acres are privately managed wetlands, and 280-320,000 acres are private winter-flooded rice. An analysis done by some of the NGO partners of the CVJV estimates that the replacement value of all private lands in this ecosystem mix is approximately \$2 Billion (cost of lands replacement, water acquisition, and management of wetlands).

In many parts of the Central Valley, private wetlands and winter flooded agriculture (primarily rice and corn) provide the majority of food resources for millions of waterfowl, shorebirds and other water birds annually. In addition, this system of public and private wetlands and agricultural habitat provides for more than 200 wetland dependent species, including threatened and endangered species such as the Giant Garter Snake.

With respect to the draft Ecosystems Improvement language, we note:

- The draft document appropriately identifies improved water supply reliability for wetlands and wildlife refuges as an important objective, and that water supply reliability for wetlands and refuges should be counted as an ecosystem improvement benefit.

- We ask that you amend the document to clarify that the term “wildlife refuges” is commonly understood to include state wildlife areas, national wildlife refuges, and privately managed protected wetland habitat areas, and the Commission should also use this definition to ensure maximum ecosystem benefits.
- We agree that delivered supplies to improve wetlands and wildlife refuge areas beyond current baselines should be included as an ecosystem benefit. However, supplies that enable maintenance of wetlands and wildlife refuges at current baselines at times when water would otherwise not be provided should also be considered improvements. For example, “improvements” could be defined to include maintenance of wetlands that would otherwise experience reduced water availability during times of drought.
- Certain water use practices on private agricultural lands such as winter flooding for crop decomposition provides valuable habitat for wildlife, and we urge the Commission to include the option of counting such water uses as ecosystem benefits if the benefits are enforceable and create increased habitat reliability.
- We ask you to draft guidelines that encourage those who are helping to plan and propose water storage projects to include wildlife water deliveries in early planning documents, to ensure that 50% of the State’s public benefit requirement will be dedicated to ecosystem improvements.
- Finally, we suggest that when considering ecosystem benefits on private agricultural lands, the Commission should make sure that the proposed benefits are enforceable through contracts and/or easements and agency oversight, and accrue from practices that truly benefit wildlife such as winter flooding of rice fields.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. We look forward to further dialogue through the Stakeholder Advisory Process, and are available for questions or comments should the Commission desire to follow up.

Sincerely,



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Director, Western Region



Ric Ortega, Grasslands Water District
General Manager



Meghan Hertel, Audubon California
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