



M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: September 5, 2024

TO: Anastasia Shippey, Sacramento County

FROM: Brighton Heard, Westervelt Ecological Services

RE: Diminishing Agricultural Value of the Zacharias Ranch Property

The Zacharias Ranch property is a 590-acre farm located along Snodgrass Slough in the southern extent of Sacramento County. Westervelt Ecological Services desires to establish a mitigation bank on the property, which would convert the land from agricultural use to a restored natural habitat “open space” use, consistent with Sacramento County guidelines. The property has been farmed for over 100 years, but this use is becoming progressively more unsustainable.

Portions of the property have been granted “prime agriculture” designations. This designation was historically based on soil type and number of years farmed but does not consider the practicality or sustainability of agricultural practices on the land. Current hydrologic conditions are not equivalent to the historical hydrologic conditions present on this property when initially developed for agriculture. The property was reclaimed in the 1930s with berms to protect it from tidal action and pumps for dewatering. Snodgrass Slough used to be a longer branching slough but has been blocked by earthen barriers and one way flap gates, resulting in the property being at the effective dead end of the slough. Much of the property’s elevation is within the intertidal zone or shallow subtidal and requires pumping water out of it to maintain conditions to support farming practices and crop viability.

Due to the high water table and seasonal inaccessibility of the property, only lower-value, annual crops can be grown, and these may only be grown during summer months. Orchards, vineyards, or other perennial crops would not survive in the saturated clay soils. If early fall rain arrives before crops have been harvested, the property can become too wet to conduct a harvest. In 2022 the farmer was not able to harvest their entire tomato crop and only half of their watermelon crop. This was a result of early fall rains that made soil conditions too wet for farm equipment to access and harvest the crops.

The perimeter berms have not been adequately maintained over the last few decades, with annual-lease farmers not invested in levee repair. The past owner did not pay into a Reclamation District and did not maintain the perimeter berm except for repairs of damaged areas. The owner prior sold the property due to bankruptcy. Therefore, the perimeter berm is now in significant disrepair with no pooled or saved funds for improvements to prevent further disrepair or catastrophic failure.

The property is also designed to flood with a lower elevation portion of perimeter berm that allows water to spill into the it and, in theory, reduce pressure on the berms reducing the potential of breach failure. However, the property has had significant breaches in fast rising floodwater events, resulting in significant repair costs and loss of farming.

In 2017 the farm berms breached resulting in the property being flooded. The berm was repaired enough to continue farming by using soils from the agricultural field. The 2023 flood caused three breaches in the farm berm along Snodgrass Slough and major damage to other portions of the berm. It took months to pump the property so that it was dry enough to fully repair the breaches and related wind/wave erosion damage to the farm berm. The pumping and repairs from that single event totaled nearly one million dollars.

Considering overtopping and breaches the property has most recently flooded in 1986, 1997, 2006, 2007, 2017, and January 1, 2023. Only two harvests have occurred in the past 5 years due to flooding and/or wet field conditions.

Generating enough revenue to cover the cost of berm improvements or repairs, and the cost of farming under current constraints is becoming increasingly more difficult and unsustainable. Climate change and sea-level rise compound the likelihood of future flood events and contribute to the degradation of the agricultural value of the land. Repairing the berm to be resilient to future climate change and sea-level rise conditions would be a significant investment, in addition to the cost to keep the property pumped dry enough for agricultural production.

In summary, this tract of land is no longer sustainable to farm and would provide far greater benefits to the County as restored native habitat. An accidental breach could result in unrepairable conditions due to costs and could also result in delayed marsh establishment or undesirable conditions, such as Frank's Tract or McCormack Williamson Tract. The planned restoration would be a sustainable investment to jumpstart the restoration of natural habitats on the property. The project is complementary to the South Sacramento Habitat Conservation Plan and the Sacramento General Plan by supporting the preservation and restoration of the Cosumnes River riparian ecosystem.