



MONO COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

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Date: February 3rd, 2015
To: Honorable Board of Supervisors
From: Tony Dublino, Environmental Services Manager
Subject: Conway Ranch Update and Workshop

Recommended Action: Receive presentation and provide direction to staff.

Fiscal Impact: None

Discussion: The Conway Ranch Conservation Easement is now in place. This has created a new paradigm for the management of Conway Ranch, and provides certainty about the potential of the future.

Annual Report

The 2014 Annual Report and 2015 Operations Plan is in draft form, and represents one aspect of this new paradigm. Since it is the first report of its kind, it is being presented to the Board for consideration and direction, prior to being distributed for public input. This Plan will fulfill obligations under the existing California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Streambed Alteration (1600) Permit, as well as a similar reporting requirement under the Conservation Easement. The Plan will help prioritize and organize future activities, provide information to interested parties, and effectively monitor year-to-year progress.

CA DFW Update

Staff has engaged CDFW in discussions relating to the (now expired) aquaculture permit at the site, the existing 1600 permit, potential future activities, and other issues..

In regards to the aquaculture permit, it expired as of Jan 1, 2015. Staff had investigated the potential for transferring the permit (from IAG to the County) in 2014, prior to its expiration, but since there was no aquaculture occurring or planned at the time, there was nothing to permit, and nothing for CDFW to inspect. The expired permit included conditions that limited the maximum live-fish production to 45,000 pounds, and also restricted the export of fish to only whirling disease-positive waters (generally Mono and Inyo Counties). Staff has since explored alternatives that might allow for more pounds of production, or the export into non-whirling waters.

The existing 1600 permit was issued in 2012, in conjunction with the installation of the Bell Pipeline. Discussion with CDFW staff included ways in which enhancement efforts might be better documented in the future, and how success criteria might be better monitored. In consideration of future activities involving maintenance of the irrigation system, DFW

suggested that a programmatic 1600 permit covering all operations and maintenance on the Conway Ranch might be the best approach. There are differing opinions on whether DFW actually has jurisdiction over an irrigation ditch, and the related maintenance.

Planning the future at Conway

Conway Ranch presents tremendous opportunities—grazing, aquaculture, recreation, conservation, historic preservation, and education. In order to develop each of these opportunities, it will be important to obtain input to direct efforts, and funding to pay for them. Both input and funding can be obtained in a variety of ways. Today's workshop will provide the Board an opportunity to direct staff on how to best obtain both.

Aquaculture

The future of aquaculture at the site presents a number of issues that are in need of direction from the Board. One key issue is whether the Board is willing to apply financial resources to the development of aquaculture at the site. The Mono County Fisheries Commission (MCFC) has played a role in providing recommendations regarding aquaculture activities at Conway Ranch in the past, but there is a question as to whether the MCFC wants to continue focusing its attention on aquaculture at Conway.

Aquaculture in summer 2015 does not appear to be a possibility at this time, but there are efforts that could be undertaken to prepare for a sustainable aquaculture facility in the future. One of the most important pieces of information that could be developed in summer 2015 would be a comprehensive data log of seasonal temperatures, chemical quality, and quantity of the available surface water. This information will provide critical information for any potential aquaculture operator of the future.

Beyond this, if the intent is to attract an operator who would develop a full-scale hatchery as is envisioned in the Conservation Easement, the Board will want to consider additional investments, specifically the evaluation of groundwater resources on the property (in compliance with CEQA and the Conservation Easement). These larger investments represent capital improvements that may be evaluated through the recently approved Project Approval Request process.

There may be opportunities to utilize the ponds at the site for grow-out purposes during a specific period in the summer. This effort would require security and staffing, however, which is currently not funded. At this time, there have not been any parties interested in performing this work at no cost to the County.

Recreation and Education

Regardless of future aquaculture developments, the property remains a largely untapped resource in terms of recreation and education. With proper planning and direction, the recreation activities envisioned in the Conservation Easement might be fully realized, including hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, bicycling, picnicking, wildlife viewing, bird watching, horseback riding, visiting historical sites, painting, photography, hunting, and fishing. There are also untapped opportunities for research and education into the site's rich history, and its flora and fauna.

There may be grant opportunities or partnerships that could be explored to provide necessary support. The Draft Annual Report currently does not include any projects aimed at enhancing recreational or educational activities on the site.

Conservation

The conservation and enhancement of the property will also require resources. This is one area where grant opportunities, agency coordination and volunteer support present many good opportunities. In the absence of these resources, the Board has the option of funding certain projects, should they so desire. Many such projects have already been listed in the Annual Report.

Input, Outreach and Planning

Conway Ranch has been the subject of major outreach efforts in the past. Those efforts have succeeded in generating clear indications of what interested parties would like to see at Conway Ranch, at a given time. These indications have not always agreed with one another, but a considerable amount of outreach has already occurred. Much of that work has been included in the Conservation Easement.

The Annual Report and Operations Plan presents another opportunity to incorporate important direction of the past, while providing opportunity for future concepts to be included as they emerge. Considering the history of input and the new beginning of the Conservation Easement, it seems to be a good time for the Board to re-visit outreach efforts of the past and provide direction on the outreach of the future.

Role of advisory groups in Conway Ranch planning

The MCFC has been intimately involved in the Conway Ranch. Recently, with the cessation of aquaculture activities and the fact that Conway may not represent the most cost effective way to put fish in Mono County waters, the MCFC may be transitioning away from its historic role of supporting aquaculture efforts on the property, and toward a role focused simply on the cost-effective provision of fish. Staff is requesting direction from the Board on how outreach to the MCFC should be conducted in the future.

The Mono Basin RPAC has also been intimately involved in the Conway Ranch. They will likely be interested in reviewing, and commenting on any proposal that comes forth for Conway Ranch. Staff is requesting direction from the Board on how outreach to the MBRPAC should be conducted in the future.

Long Term Plans/Ideas for Aquaculture

Beyond this summer, there are several different ways the County could approach long-term aquaculture at Conway Ranch. These questions do not need to be answered today, but it is important to begin thinking about how the County is going to make the most out of this valuable resource, and what kind of resources the County is willing to provide in order to do so. Some potential courses of action include:

- Prepare and distribute an Aquaculture RFP now and see what responses are generated.
- Develop angling education and outreach programs at the site.

- Seek partnerships with willing organizations or individuals who would be interested in performing aquaculture on Conway Ranch at no cost to the County.
- Invest in accurately quantifying the surface water and ground water resources before distributing a more focused RFP.
- Operate Conway Ranch in-house, by hiring or contracting with an aquaculture expert and staffing the site as necessary.

As desired, the Board can provide direction on these concepts and ensure that Conway Ranch management is proceeding in a Board-supported fashion.

If you have any questions regarding this item, please contact me at (760) 932-5453.

Respectfully submitted,



Tony Dublino
Environmental Services Manager

Attachments: Draft Conway Ranch 2014 Annual Report and 2015 Operations Plan