

LO196 Suisun RCD



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February 2, 2012

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL: eircomments@deltacouncil.ca.gov

Mr. Phil Isenberg
Chair, Delta Stewardship Council
980 Ninth Street, Suite 1500
Sacramento, California 95814

Subject: Suisun Resource Conservation District Comments on the Delta Plan
Draft EIR

Dear Mr. Isenberg,

The Suisun Resource Conservation District (SRCD) is a legislatively created special district with the primary local responsibility for promoting wetland conservation of the Suisun Marsh through improvements in water management practices on private lands within the primary management area of the Suisun Marsh. (Public Resources Code 9962.) The SRCD has taken the leadership role for over 40 years to ensure adequate water quality in the Suisun Marsh – a condition necessary to promote a diversity of productive waterfowl habitat, enhance the wetland resource values through appropriate management practices, and ensure the wetland and wildlife values of the Suisun Marsh are sustained and protected. The Suisun Marsh landowners and SRCD have been the stewards of these wetland and wildlife resources for over a century, and advocated for the passage of the 1977 Suisun Marsh Preservation Act to protect these wetland resources from development and loss.

Along with California Department of Water Resources, the California Department of Fish & Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Services, and the United States Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), the SRCD is a Principal Agency in the development of the Suisun Marsh Habitat Management, Preservation and Restoration Plan (SMP) and associated environmental impact report/statement (SMP EIR/EIS). The SMP is a comprehensive management plan based upon a collaborative process with stakeholder participation to develop a 30 year plan for the Suisun Marsh to address conflicts regarding management of existing Marsh resources, the enhancement and long term management of managed wetlands, and the restoration of tidal wetlands to contribute to the recovery of terrestrial and aquatic listed species. For the past decade, SRCD has worked cooperatively with the other principal agencies to develop the SMP.

LO196-1

Response to comment LO196-1

Comment noted.

Response to comment LO196-2

This is a comment on the project, not on the EIR.

Recently, and in conjunction with the environmental reviews processes for both the SMP and the Delta Plan, Delta Stewardship Council (DSC) staff members have made both written and oral negative comments regarding alleged potential inconsistencies between the SMP and the Delta Plan. In this regard, the January 5, 2012 letter from DSC staff to the BOR declares the SMP has “shortcomings...related to impacts of land subsidence, science integration, tidal marsh restoration approach, and modeling....” The letter further provides that “if these shortcomings remain unaddressed, the [DSC] may be unable to incorporate the SMP into the Delta Plan and that state-or locally-funded projects to carry out the SMP may be inconsistent with Delta Plan policies.”

The January 5, 2012, DSC letter states that any future seasonal wetland management and operations, or public funding that may support activities that may cause ongoing land subsidence in the Suisun Marsh may be inconsistent with the Delta Plan. This statement appears to be based on a mis-interpretation of Delta Plan Policy ER P3 and, if applied, will significantly negatively affect the future of existing land uses and have significant environmental consequences for all peat soils in the Delta and Suisun Marsh. The desire of staff to eliminate any potential oxidation and reduction of peat in the soils (which may lead to subsidence), for all of the Delta and Suisun Marsh soils would require the permanent flooding of the entire region. This would terminate agricultural practices in the Delta and eliminate the existence of seasonal managed wetlands and upland habitats in all of the Suisun Marsh. Furthermore, it would significantly degrade the existing environmental condition for resident and migratory wildlife in the Suisun Marsh. The 5th draft Delta Plan states, “Routine agricultural practices are unlikely to be considered covered action unless they have significant impacts on the achievement of the coequal goals.” So, farming of any peat soils in the Delta also may be in conflict with ER P3 based upon statements contained in the January 5, 2012 letter.

As a SMP Principal Agency, SRCD is extremely disappointed with the negative and misguided comments from DSC staff regarding alleged inconsistencies between the SMP and the Delta Plan. SRCD implores the DSC to reconsider its staff's position regarding alleged inconsistencies between the SMP and the Delta Plan. SRCD and the other Principal Agencies understand the SMP to be complementary to the Delta Plan, and not in conflict. As well, SRCD requests that the DSC respect the multi-decade planning efforts and coordination that underlie the SMP. The SMP is the culmination of four decades of planning between the Principal Agencies to manage the ecological resources of the Suisun Marsh. These collaborative efforts have resulted in high habitat values within the Suisun Marsh, while allowing the State and Federal water projects to operate in a manner that creates Marsh salinity levels which would otherwise have significant environmental impacts to the Marsh.

LO196-2

SRCD is certain that the SMP significantly contributes and supports the coequal goals of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Reform Act of 2009, the mission of the Delta Stewardship Council, and implements strategies for restoring a healthy Delta ecosystem, while protecting and enhancing existing ecosystem resources of the Delta. The SMP will play a significant role in meeting the Delta Plan's mandate to "[r]estore habitat necessary to avoid a net loss of migratory bird habitat and, where feasible, increase migratory bird habitat to promote viable populations of migratory birds." (Water Code Section 85302(e)(6).) As well, the SMP manifests the Delta Plan's duty to promote: viable populations of native resident and migratory species; functional corridors for migratory species; and diverse and biologically appropriate habitat and processes. (Water Code Section 85302 (c). SRCD encourages the DSC to direct staff to work cooperatively with the SMP Principal Agencies to implement Delta ecosystem protection, restoration, and enhancements. Doing so will complement existing functioning wildlife and wetlands resources and minimize potential impacts on existing Suisun Marsh wetland resources, wildlife values, and water quality.

But, based on the current contents of the Delta Plan and the DSC staff's written interpretations of the Delta Plan's applicability to the SMP, it is clear that the Delta Plan EIR has failed to adequately analyze the environmental impacts that may be associated with the Delta Plan. Implementation of the Delta Plan's current draft policies on the Suisun Marsh will have significant direct and indirect physical changes in the environment. The following environmental consequences have not been adequately considered, disclosed, or analyzed in the Delta Plan EIR and must be addressed:

- The loss, conversion, or degradation of existing seasonal managed wetland habitats from implementation of the Delta Plan;
- The loss, conversion, or degradation of existing wildlife species diversity, abundance and presence in the Suisun Marsh from implementation of the Delta Plan;
- Reductions in existing waterfowl species composition, abundance, and distribution of wintering food source availability and loss;
- Reductions of wintering waterfowl carrying capacity within Suisun Marsh;
- Impacts and loss of resident breeding and migratory waterfowl populations, raptors, water birds, and terrestrial wildlife species;
- Impacts and loss of wetland plant communities in the managed wetlands supporting the endangered Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse; and
- The economic and social impact of changes in existing Marsh habitats and salinity regimes that could change existing waterfowl hunting and the financial viability of continued wetland conservation activities.

Response to comment LO196-3

In response to this comment, please see text change(s) in Section 5 in this FEIR. This additional information would not change the conclusions in the Program EIR that the potential of the Proposed Project to conflict with local policies—and thus its impacts—could be significant.

LO196-3

SRCD supports the Delta Plan process. For the sake of achieving significant ecosystem restoration goals and maintaining the unique environmental values of the Suisun Marsh, SRCD requests that the DSC respect and support the SMP.

LO196-4

If you have any questions regarding the content of this letter, please contact me at (707) 425-9302 or schappell@suisunrcd.org.

Sincerely,



Steven Chappell,
Executive Director, SRCD

Cc. Ms. Terry Macaulay, Delta Stewardship Council
SRCD Board of Directors,
SMP Principal Agencies,

Response to comment LO196-4

Comment noted.