Migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway.

Elkhorn Slough – Slicing Red Tape

Elkhorn Slough is a 44,000-acre watershed that straddles important agricultural areas of Monterey and San Benito counties along California's Central Coast. It is one of the last remaining coastal wetland marshes in the state, providing a stopover for migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway and a nursery area for marine fish.

Cultivation of strawberries, broccoli and other crops upstream of Elkhorn Slough impaired water quality in the slough with sediment, pesticide residues and stormwater runoff. Local landowners whose properties contributed to sediment and other runoff were interested in improving their practices, but were frustrated by a complex and time-consuming permit process that often required them to get multiple permits from different state and/or federal agencies for a single project.

Beginning in 1997, a partnership spearheaded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a San Francisco-based nonprofit environmental group called Sustainable Conservation and the Resource Conservation District (RCD) of Monterey County designed a program to cut through the permitting red tape and get worthy conservation projects approved. It reduces permitting to a one-stop process and offers technical assistance to landowners for runoff-control projects. The resulting **Partners in Restoration** (PIR) permit-coordination program has become a model for similar efforts elsewhere in California. "It's not a free pass, but it is a fast pass," said Carolyn Remick of Sustainable Conservation, likening the program to the popular transit passes that speed commuters through traffic congestion on toll bridges.

With input from regulatory agencies, a list of 10 pre-approved

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conservation practices was adopted to streamline permitting for landowners in the watershed. NRCS holds a master permit under the program that constitutes a pre-approval of projects that benefit the watershed. Landowners who contact NRCS are referred into the permit-streamlining program and given technical assistance and sometimes partial funding for their projects, Remick said. If a landowner fails to follow conditions of the permit, it can be revoked and the landowner subject to penalties, she said.

Each individual project is tailored to match up with conditions of the master permit, so individual project permits can take some time to work out, Remick said. Everybody gets something out of the permit-streamlining program. It makes it easier for more landowners to undertake and carry out projects to improve the watershed, and both permit-issuing agencies and landowners are freed from the burden of processing individual permit applications, she said.

A 2004 report on PIR's first five years lists dozens of projects that were proposed for coverage under the master permit, most of them to control sediment. Another report credits the program with preventing more than 50,000 tons of soil from eroding off agricultural operations in the watershed, enough to fill a line of full-size pickup trucks stretching more than 400 miles.

The program has been successful enough in the Elkhorn Slough that the concept is being exported to other areas. Remick said similar projects have been tried in a half-dozen coastal counties, and Sustainable Conservation is working with RCDs in the Central Valley to transplant it there. She credited the RCDs as a crucial link in the Elkhorn Slough program between Sustainable Conservation, regulators and landowners.

Contact: Carolyn Remick, Sustainable Conservation, (415) 977-0380