

# **American Basin Working Landscapes Project**

**Joe C Navari**

# Initial Selection Panel Review

0049

American Basin Working Landscapes Project

Placer County Resource Conservation District

*Applicant amount requested:* \$1,860,898

*Fund This Amount:* \$100,000

The proposed project would develop a GIS-based "American Basin Working Landscape Strategy", implement three specific riparian and wetland restoration projects, and prepare the applicants to purchase up to four wildlife-friendly agricultural easements. These efforts would complement similar efforts in the American Basin funded for more than \$8 million in private, state and federal grants. Although the Regional Panel gave the proposal an Excellent rating, the Technical Review Panel gave the proposal only a Fair rating. The Technical Panel felt the proposal lacked detail concerning the methods used to develop the strategy and evidence that the projects would help species of concern. This proposal does have the potential to benefit target species (including giant garter snakes), would develop a strategy designed to be consistent with the needs of several potential cost-share partners (including Farm Bill sources), and works directly with farmers to preserve farmland as habitat. Panel felt the strategy would be especially useful and recommends funding adequate to support developing the strategy (likely between \$100,000 and \$150,000, including portions of tasks 1, 5, and 6, and all of task 2). The Panel did not recommend funding the restoration projects or easement development as there were too many concerns associated with these efforts. For instance, it was not clear how durable the restoration projects would be, given the threat of development in this area. As it relates to easement acquisition, the proposal does envision specific parcels for such acquisition. Funds are proposed for mere execution of option agreements, legal review and due diligence revisions, with the expectation of subsequent easement funding from other sources. Therefore,

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Initial Selection Panel Review

the panel does not support funding that component of the proposal

Fund With Conditions

# Technical Panel Review

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

*Amount Requested:* \$1,860,898

Panel Rating:

**Fair - Lacking in one or more critical aspects**

## Panel Summary

The panel felt that this proposal had one or more sound or worthy concepts. Based on its technical merits, however, this proposal is lacking in one or more critical aspects and should not be funded in its current form. If the four agricultural easements were successfully purchased and the associated restoration projects were completed, the project has the potential to provide an alternative outcome to farmers who are facing rapid, encroaching urbanization in the region. The strategy of addressing the interests of local government, the agricultural community, and environmental interests was well-integrated. However, the proposal provides little evidence to demonstrate that the easements would help species of concern. Panel members voiced concern that the protection of small, expensive, fragmented parcels as proposed in this project may not provide a habitat benefit, and the information in the proposal does not adequately allay this concern. The Panel noted that the project lacks detail in several areas that would link it to the ERP program and the PSP.

The Panel found that the proposed project lacks detail on how the proposed "Working Landscape Strategy" would be developed. Some Panel members were concerned by the lack of detail on the terms of the conservation easements in terms of wildlife habitat and management. Other Panel members noted that in the rapidly-urbanizing region covered by this proposal, the habitat values provided by agricultural lands is important enough to justify the effort, even without explicit species use data.

# External Technical Review #1

*Proposal Number:* 0049

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

*Amount Requested:* \$1,860,898

## Goals

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	I think the project goal is adequate and the objectives are spelled out well. Protection of lands in the working landscape of the American Basin is important as spelled out in the CAL FED ERP. All objectives are measureable. However, I was hoping to see more specific criteria defined for how to measure response amongst the species of concern (eg. , giant garter snake, Swainson's hawk, etc.).

## Justification And Conceptual Model

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	I thought the conceptual model was well done and spelled out specific key ecological attributes of target species (e.g, nesting, spawning, etc). However, it may be overwhelming and oversimplistic to key responses strictly to species abundance. For wide ranging species, conservation action in the American Basin won't necessarily trigger an increase in abundance-- in other words you could have a false negative or positive that is totally unrelated to the project. That is why it would be better to focus upon nesting success and site specific recruitment by species of interest. Foraging attributes would also be of interest along with body condition measures.

External Technical Review #1

	I was not clear about whether this project is meant to be a pilot, demonstration, or full scale implementation....it list all possibilities. I assume we're talking about a demonstration using the 4 tracts mentioned.
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**Approach**

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	I liked the approach of developing a specific strategic plan...calling it DRAFT and then engaging the key stakeholders to get buy in, then, conduct major revisions based upon public feedback. On-the-ground ecological restoration is a tangible way to get the attention of private landowners and provide enhanced habitat for the Sacramento River and watershed. I'm not sure how the specific properties were selected. I would hope that some sort of prioritization process was used versus being opportunistic based upon random landowner interest. The work on securing easements is vital. I like that approach to ensure perpetual protection. It was not clear as to where the \$\$\$ would come from to purchase those easements-- it appeared either the state or county would eventually support easement acquisition but that wasn't totally clear.

**Feasibility**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	As for the restoration projects-- I've worked with DU before and have confidence that that aspect will be readily achieved. The engineering, restoration, and followup measures should be feasible. I'm a little less certain about the easement acquisition work...the sources of funding for the easement acquisitions are not clear...if this fails, the project won't reach near the positive impact that it envisions.

External Technical Review #1

	I'm not certain how metrics involving species of concern will be generated.
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**Performance Evaluation**

<b>Rating</b>	fair
<b>Comments</b>	I was disappointed not to see more effort put into assessing project benefits for species and plant communities of concern. The easement work and the restoration efforts are fairly straightforward in terms of what to monitor to ensure success. Measuring species response to those efforts is more complex. For example, with restoration measures in place-- what sort of salmon response might be measured to assess project effectiveness? What about the giant garter snake? This aspect is the primary weakness of the proposal. I have confidence that waterbird (ducks/shorebirds) use will be adequately monitored.

**Proposed Outcomes**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	<p>Perpetual protection of lands threatened by development in the American Basin is a high value outcome. I applaud the project team on incorporating numerous agriculturally based partners on the front end of this work. Contributions to rice and other agricultural operations will be essentially blunting the development edge that is moving into rural portions of the Central Valley. I think this project could be a model for supporting a large scale easement program in this region and it's exportabilty may be high. Limitations will be how much funding is available at any one time for easement purchases and the threshold for monitoring easement compliance of many tracts.</p> <p>It appears that data storage with the local RCD offices is a practical approach.</p>

## Capabilities

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	All the partners involved in this project have a good track record. TPL, DU, the RCD network all appear to be sound and capable of delivering products described in this proposal.

## Cost-Benefits

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	It's hard for me to get a handle on restoration costs the way the proposal was written. It appears linear feet of the river may be enhanced along with acreages of wetlands, riparian corridor and the river itself. Task 3-restoration measures take the lion's share of the project funding (> \$1 mill). Easement purchases may get very expensive in this area but as far as I could tell they requesting ~\$600K. Many more dollars will be needed to generate a meaningful program. There was no mention of efforts to secure bargain sales with landowners. I would assume this approach would be desired since the bargain portion could easily be used as match against grant funding for more easement purchases-- in other words the easement funding could go much farther with bargain sales. However, each negotiation is unique and that option may not be available in all cases. I did not see specific funding for monitoring species of concern.

## Overall Evaluation Summary Rating

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	The strengths of this project are that it would directly address a major threat in the project area-- habitat destruction and fragmentation from encroaching development. The window of opportunity to make something happen for conservation may be closing rapidly in this area.



External Technical Review #1

It would have been a stronger proposal if specific animal population monitoring approaches were included to better measure project effectiveness. Some level of measuring landowner acceptance of conservation easements in the area might also be a good approach. However, the public involvement approach seems adequate.

# External Technical Review #2

*Proposal Number:* 0049

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

*Amount Requested:* \$1,860,898

## Goals

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	<p>The proposed project aim is to promote conservation practices and restoration actions in the context of an active agricultural landscape. Plan elements are related to some priority species and ERP objectives. The project proposes a set of activities (farming practices, conservation easements, actual farm conservation implementations, outreach, work group - stakeholder engagement, GIS landscape model) that mixes farm community connections with conservation opportunities and demonstrated actions on farms. Example project performance measures are provided and they mix habitat amounts and numbers of engaged farmers. The proposal presents strong capability to assist farmers in adopting and implementing restoration actions by making available practical assistance, implementation financing, and case studies to observe. The farm changes being promoted appear to be standard conservation actions so in-depth technical help does not appear needed. Overall, the project is a good practical mix of activities to promote conservation actions with farmers. The proposal often mixes unlike</p>

External Technical Review #2

	ERP aims that are on topic for the project efforts, and the proposal fails to provide any description of some aspects of the effort (e.g., GIS model - how it would be done).
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**Justification And Conceptual Model**

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	The conceptual model (chart with species abundances at center), proposed project activities, and use of ERP objectives are very general and superficial in use. The proposal starts with the idea of a working landscape model, a mosaic of lands, a list of restoration benefits, and analysis tools like GIS. However, it does not actual say how a model would be made, a mosaic assessed, benefits qualified, and why GIS would be used. I assume very basic applications of the ideas and tools would be done. The proposal is best as a farmer engagement and conservation promotion effort. For the project organizations, this is what they have done, know, and are organized to continue. I do not feel there is potential for more than practical conservation promotion and execution.

**Approach**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	The approach that will be used is well described: direct activities aimed at farmers to get conservation actions in place. Outreach and community education efforts layered on the care effort are routine and will likely reach a proper local audience. I do not see this project adding to overall understanding and generating new data and information relating ecological and agricultural systems. It is a straight forward effort to make farm conservation happen and that can be very useful as a model implementation program.

## Feasibility

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	<p>I judge the likelihood of achieving the core objectives as good. The mix of engaging farmers, providing practical incentives and needs for action, and having fully developed local cases seems to me a proper and effective way to get things done on farms. I believe those farmers interested in doing conservation will be attracted to the project effort. The organizations proposing the project do the things described and appear to be working together already at a good level. Some other project aspects like a landscape model, GIS analyses, and measuring actual species benefits are unlikely to be more than descriptions of routine activities.</p>

## Performance Evaluation

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	<p>The proposal describes how performance would be judged and reported. The measures listed are habitats (areas and units of land and water) with numbers on involved farmers. This reporting will be proper and effective for documenting conservation activity and local community impact. Monitoring is described as following up on performance accounting. The reporting promised is fine and practical for what will be done under the project.</p>

## Proposed Outcomes

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	<p>I anticipate the project will yield on-the-ground conservation actions documented at a descriptive level with experiences reported for farmer engagement and community support development. An active conservation implementation effort that succeeds in getting things done would be desirable to have well documented. It</p>

External Technical Review #2

	would be a model for more basins and regions.
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**Capabilities**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	The project is proposed by a group of organizations already working together to do much of what is described. This is a good group to do what is promised and the project proposal is what they have been doing. They have experience, resources, and capacity to work at the level of getting farm conservation practices implemented.

**Cost-Benefits**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	The project request considerable funding. However, implementation is expensive and the activities of the project staff are needed. It is not known how many farmers will want help and support so sizing of funding is hard to judge. There is also considerable funding in hand now. Overall, I see the request as reasonable given the context and likely costs.

**Overall Evaluation Summary Rating**

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	The proposed project is actually a direct effort to attract and engage farmers in doing conservation on their land. The simultaneous use of outreach, education, collaboration, assistance, funding, and demonstrations seems like an approach to get things done. This proposed effort comes from experience and a group of organizations working together on what is promised. The project does not appear well planned or likely to generate new understanding, yield novel data, advance conservation science, and other more lofty aims. Some higher concepts and tools are given in the proposal but these are not developed to where I think much will happen beyond the routine. If the

External Technical Review #2

desire is to promote conservation actions, it seems  
this effort is right for achievement.

# External Technical Review #3

*Proposal Number:* 0049

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

*Amount Requested:* \$1,860,898

## Goals

<b>Rating</b>	excellent
<b>Comments</b>	<p>Protect working landscapes, wildlife habitat and riparian conditions within the American River Basin Ecological Management Unit. "The project includes the following components: (1) working landscape strategy; (2) four riparian restoration projects; and, (3) farmland protections through the use of agricultural easements." Excellent sets of goals.</p> <p>More specific individual goals have objectives, conceptual model, scope of work Actual restoration projects look sound: a fish-friendly culvert, revegetation, riparian fences to exclude cattle, etc. Good description of specifics, Includes three years of maintenance.</p>

## Justification And Conceptual Model

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	I don't feel this was very clearly articulated (although there are some charts later in the proposal that are relevant. But the interconnections are discussed throughout the proposal and I think it is apparent that the PIs are well aware of the conceptual

External Technical Review #3

	model. It rests, broadly, in promoting wildlife-friendly agriculture in working landscapes.
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**Approach**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	More of a task list and work plan than "study design and methods"> Based on my reading, the PIs understand well the stakeholder/planning process, outreach, restoration practices and easements. I thought the description of restoration practices was very good.

**Feasibility**

<b>Rating</b>	excellent
<b>Comments</b>	strong aspect of proposal. high likelihood of success.

**Performance Evaluation**

<b>Rating</b>	fair
<b>Comments</b>	<p>In their words: "The key to the success of this project will be the outreach activities and recruitment of willing sellers for agricultural land protections and restoration/enhancement projects. The project will monitor the number of participating landowners, distribution of educational materials and one-on-one discussions with private landowners to ensure that a connected area of farmlands have the opportunity to enlist in a protection program and restoration projects."</p> <p>Elsewhere they appear to cite CalFed as saying that these steps lead to wildlife improvements. Unless I missed it, there is NO biological/ecological monitoring proposed. A major weakness.</p>



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**Proposed Outcomes**

<b>Rating</b>	good
<b>Comments</b>	I think they should get real benefit sin education, improve the habitat where restoration is enacted, make progress towards the easement, etc etc. Unclear how lessons learned/ knowledge gained reach other professionals and practitioners

**Capabilities**

<b>Rating</b>	excellent
<b>Comments</b>	all personnel seem highly qualified and experienced

**Cost-Benefits**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	They ask for \$1.8 m and identify ~\$8m in promised and expected matches. Sounds good. The planning and education parts are reasonably priced. I canbelieve the restoration work will cost \$1.1m. I am confused by the easement piece. It looks like they are just developing a plan, and will seek additional funds, and don't yet have a price, but this task comes in at \$600k.  Hopefully your reveiw team will figure this out!

**Overall Evaluation Summary Rating**

<b>Rating</b>	very good
<b>Comments</b>	lots to like in this proposal. good concept, experienced folks, should produce real benefits. some concerns described above

# Sacramento Regional Panel Review

*Proposal Number:* 0049

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

## *1. Applicability to ERP goals and regional priorities.*

The proposal includes a detailed explanation of the American River Basin's contribution to ERP goals and CALFED implementation plans. Additionally, the Proposers have laid out a detailed action plan in achieving and delivering restoration objectives and farmland protections of importance to the region. The inclusion of Ducks Unlimited and their staff expertise is valuable to the overall credibility of the proposed deliverables.

notes:

The project targets lands that are currently under intensive development pressure.

## *2. Links with other restoration actions.*

The successful funding of this proposal follows previous efforts including the Auburn Ravine Coon Creek ERP and will expand the ability of the project team to continue working in a positive manner in the watershed. The project is already a model for doing restoration and planning in the state, this project will further solidify their leadership role in the area of watershed management.

notes:

## Sacramento Regional Panel Review

The proposal covers an area that has already leveraged significant funds for related projects.

### *3. Local circumstances.*

The proposal is very well thought out and presented to meet local concerns and regional concerns. The project has secured pilot projects with landowners of significant size to provide an important contribution to local restoration and preservation efforts. These pilot projects, if done correctly, will serve as a model for other landowners to participate in the future

notes:

### *4. Local involvement.*

The Proposers explain that local agencies and stakeholders have been involved for numerous years and mostly likely continue to provide meaningful input to the process. I am concerned that local support from water supply agencies and agricultural organizations has not been frontloaded in developing this proposal. There is a sufficient outreach component outlined the proposal that is essential in determining how successful the ABWG will be in preparing and implementing the American River Basin Working Landscapes Strategy. Additionally, the Strategy or Plan should not only be "disseminated" to the designated groups but their input should be sought during its development. It should be noted that Ducks Unlimited has an existing MOU with Sutter County to protect farmland operations. A very strong point of the proposal.

notes:

## Sacramento Regional Panel Review

Numerous stakeholders are involved but NOAA is not mentioned in the proposal. NOAA involvement is required for any work that may impact Central Valley steelhead populations. For example, work is proposed in December of 2006; this must be discussed with appropriate NOAA officials.

### *5. Local value.*

The Continued investment in the area following up on the Auburn Ravine Coon Creek ERP would contribute to the continued investment and successful implementation of state goals and objectives.

notes:

The covered region is an expensive area to make land purchases or easements, but the proposed activities could protect and enhance critical habitat for several MSCS species.

### *6. Applicant history.*

The Proposers have developed a strong team and members of the team are respected for their work in the conservation, planning and farm land protection arenas.

notes:

### *7. Summary of Overall Panel Discussion and Review*

The proposal was well written and very cohesive. The work proposed is of high value and has a great potential impact. The panel voiced some concern about the cost/benefit ratio of continued investment in this particular area of the Bay-Delta. Also, NMFS must be included in any proposed work that could

Sacramento Regional Panel Review

**impact steelhead.**

***8. Panel Quality Ranking***

**Very Good**

notes:

***9. Regional Priority Ranking***

**High**

notes:

# Environmental Compliance Review

*Proposal Number:* 0049

*Proposal Name:* American Basin Working Landscapes Project

*Applicant Organization:* Placer County Resource Conservation District

1. Is compliance with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) required for this project?

**Yes.**

2. Is compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) required for this project?

**Yes.**

3. Does this project qualify for an Exemption or Exclusion under CEQA and NEPA, respectively?

**Yes.**

Comments

**If work occurs during work windows.**

4. Did the applicant correctly identify if CEQA/NEPA compliance was required?

**Yes.**

5. Did the applicant correctly identify the correct CEQA/NEPA document required for the project?

**Yes.**

6. Has the CEQA/NEPA document been completed?

**No.**

7. If the document has not been completed, did the applicant allot enough time to complete the document before the project start date?

**Yes.**

8. If the document has not been completed, did the applicant allot enough funds to complete it?

**No.**

## Environmental Compliance Review

9. Did the applicant adequately identify other legal or regulatory compliance issues (Incidental Take permits, Scientific Collecting permits, etc.) that may affect the project?

**Yes.**

10. Does the proposal include written permission from the owners of any private property on which project activities are proposed or, if specific locations for project activities are not yet determined, is it likely that permission for access can be obtained?

**Yes.**

Comments:

**Will participate with willing landowners.**

11. Do any of these issues affect the project's feasibility due to significant deficiencies in planning and/or budgeting for legal and regulatory compliance or access to property?

**No.**

# Budget Review

*Proposal Number:* 0049

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1. Does the proposal include a detailed budget for each year of the requested support?

**Yes.**

2. Does the Budget Form include a detailed budget for each task identified on the Task and Deliverables Form and in the proposal text?

**Yes.**

3. Are the costs associated with each task and deliverable reasonable costs for performing the services?

**Yes.**

4. Is each person (employee, consultant, subcontractor, etc.) identified on the Personnel Form also included on the Budget Form?

**Yes.**

5. Are there estimated hours and an associated hourly rate of compensation for each person identified on the Personnel, Tasks and Deliverables, and Budget forms?

**No.**

If no, please explain:

**Recommend hourly rates and costs for subcontractor costs for comparables. Note: "Other costs" category for services provided by Maloney- Administration under Task 1, Ducks Unlimited under Task 3 and Task 4 and Coon Creek Restoration Task 3.**

6. Does the budget include the benefit rate for all personnel identified on the Personnel and Budget forms?

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## Budget Review

**Yes.**

7. Are the proposed labor rates comparable to state rates?

**Yes.**

If no, please explain:

**Recommend evaluating Subcontractor rates for comparables.**

8. Is more than 25% of the work proposed to be performed by subcontractors?

**Yes.**

If yes, what is the exact percentage to be performed by subcontractors?

**Total Subcontracting dollars "Other Costs" category - \$884,870  
- 47.5%**

9. Are project management expenses appropriately budgeted?

**Yes.**

10. Does the proposal clearly state the type of expenses encompassed in indirect rates or overhead costs? Are indirect rates, if used, appropriately applied?

**No.**

If no, please explain:

**No. However, rate is a reasonable rate at 30%.**

11. Does the proposal adequately explain major expenses? Are the labor rates and other charges proposed reasonable in relation to current state rates?

**No.**

If no, please explain:

**No major equipment was identified. However, \$217,675 was requested for Operating Expenses recommend more detail on operating costs. Additional recommend identifying if major equipment may be purchased by subcontractors since over 40% of the task will be completed by Subcontractors.**

## Budget Review

12. For equipment  $\geq$ \$5,000, was a separate worksheet filled out?

Please note: No overhead or indirect rate charges are allowed on the equipment purchases

**No.**

13. Is the purpose for all travel clearly represented in either the proposal itself, or in the Tasks and Deliverable Form?

Please note: Recurring travel costs for a specific task or subtask may be combined into one entry on the Budget Form, but the number of trips and cost for each trip must be clearly represented.

**No.**

14. Are travel and per diem at rates specified by the California Department of Personnel Administration for similar employees?

**No.**

15. Are other agencies contributing or likely to contribute a share of the projects? costs?

**Yes.**

If yes, when sufficient information is available, please total the amount of matching funds likely to be provided:

**Cost share estimates of \$8,382,000 is identified in the proposal from private and federal grants. FWS - \$5mill, WCB \$1.25million, Section 6 funding, Place Legacy Program.**

16. If the applicant identified cost share or matching funds, are they also described in the text of the proposal?

**Yes.**

17. Does the applicant take exception to the standard grant agreement's terms and conditions? If yes, are the approaches the applicant proposes to address these issues a reasonable starting point for negotiation a grant agreement?

**Yes.**

18. Are there other budget issues or "red flags" that warrant consideration?

## Budget Review

No.

19. Provide revised amount requested based upon your review:

\$

Other comments:

**Acquisition of Easement- w/ Wildlife Friendly Ag - Special contract language will be necessary. Note WCB contribution \$1.25 million**