How do you help bring back the sights and sounds of thousands of wintering waterfowl on a Pacific Flyway wetland without interfering with the area’s primary role of providing flood protection for 1.7 million people? Assemble a coalition of public and private interest groups committed to making it happen.

On November 12, 1997, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) formally turned over the 3,700-acre Yolo Basin Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area (YBW A) to the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to manage. The action capped eight years of study, horse-trading and earth-moving in which, as one participant said, “We joked that the biologists have become engineers and the engineers biologists.”

Officials describe the project in the Sacramento River's Yolo Bypass as the largest wetlands restoration in the West. While it retains its flood-control priority, YBW A's seasonal and permanent ponds have been sculpted from fallow farmland, and they are designed to play a role in reaching the wintering population objective for the Central Valley of 4.7 million waterfowl.

Waterfowl populations are currently near 4 million, recovering from a low of 2.5 million in 1987.

Other dividends from the restored wetlands include habitat for shorebirds, wading birds, upland game and hundreds of other wildlife species; waterfowl and upland game hunting; outdoor classrooms; birding; and eventually, fishing.

“The potential of this wildlife area is incredible,” said Dave Feliz, DFG manager of the new refuge. “We’re situated in the midst of a historically very significant wetland, yet in close proximity to major urban areas. There really is a great opportunity to create a piece of old California.”

Hundreds of scientists, engineers, educators, bulldozer operators, elected officials and volunteers have worked to create the $16 million federal-state funded project. A score of organizations have had a hand in it, including neighboring farm operations that share water delivery facilities.

“It’s really amazing to me that this project actually got done with the number of people and different agencies that were involved,” said Craig Stowers,
The YBWA is a crucial link in California’s chain of refuges that include the Tule-Klamath Basin, Gray Lodge in the Butte Sink and Los Banos in the San Joaquin Valley. It is a step toward the goal of providing 20,000 acres of new wetland habitat in the Yolo Basin as called for in the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture plan, a public-private partnership.

The YBWA headquarters can be reached at (530) 757-2461. For information on field trips and teacher workshops, call the Yolo Basin Foundation at (530) 758-1018.

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