

## **Niki Woodard: Creating a healthy watershed for tomorrow**

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The Tulare Basin Working Group celebrated its 10th anniversary at its May 2 meeting and spring tour in Alpaugh.

Over the decade, the objective of the Working Group has been to find a sustainable balance of water for people and wildlife habitat in the Tulare Basin.

Showcasing success, the group toured portions of a 6,000-acre wetland oasis on the eastern side of the historic Tulare Lake, formerly the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River. The wetlands and surrounding uplands are conserved through the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service Wetland Reserve Program, a voluntary conservation easement program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on retired farmland.

Within the Tulare Lake Basin, NRCS has conserved roughly 25,000 acres through WRP, including acreage in Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties.

The cumulative benefits of these wetlands reach well beyond their boundaries to improve watershed health, the vitality of agricultural lands and the aesthetics and economies of local communities.

The Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners and several Working Group participants are currently exploring a project that could potentially create up to a 20,000-acre flood basin, also on the bed of the historic Tulare Lake. In addition to floodwater management, the project has the potential to supply water to lands for critical migratory bird habitat and brood rearing, including WRP and refuges.

### **Making an enduring impact**

The Tulare Basin Working Group meetings, open to the public, convene agency representatives, nonprofits and other stakeholders and interested parties to brainstorm and develop action items that not only improve conditions for wildlife, but contribute to the health and sustainability of the Tulare Basin watershed.

An important topic that emerged during the May meeting was the need to better engage youth in the stewardship of the watershed.

Because a significant number of students, and even elected officials, have had little connection to nature, the Working Group discussed strategies to encourage families, youth and elected officials to engage in nature in new ways, from hiking to hunting.

Duck clubs are instrumental partners in the conservation and restoration of Tulare Basin wetlands.

Their membership levels, however, are declining dramatically, eroding their incentive to operate and provide important habitat. By partnering with duck clubs to open their doors to the public on certain days or provide tours, there is a rich opportunity for outreach and education.

The University of California, Merced, as the San Joaquin Valley's only UC campus, is focused on training the next generation of scientists and engineers by offering and encouraging outdoor leadership opportunities.

Another emerging focus for the group is working with the region's many disadvantaged communities to identify opportunities related to water quality, water supply, flood management, ecosystem enhancement, recreation and environmental education.

Through strategic partnerships among DACs, water agencies, farmers and conservation groups, the communities of Alpaugh and Allensworth are poised to resolve issues with arsenic-contaminated water.

Despite the challenges facing the Tulare Basin, there is reason to feel hope in the leadership and creative collaboration guiding natural resource planning decisions that will have positive impacts for generations to come.

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