

Steven A. Gidaro

## A History of Conservation in the Yolo Basin

### Introduction

Steve Gidaro has been a landowner and leaseholder of various properties in the Yolo Bypass area of Yolo County for over 20 years. Through various partnerships he has managed and improved these properties for wildlife, particularly waterfowl. There is nothing that Steve is more passionate about than his love of waterfowl hunting. His interest in waterfowl hunting has been translated into a 15-year legacy of exemplary land stewardship where “wildlife friendly agriculture” is more than a saying, it’s a way of doing business that melds good agronomic practices with an environmental ethic where farming and wildlife co-exist and thrive under his leadership and direction.

### I. CONAWAY RANCH

#### A. History

Steve’s history with the Conaway Ranch began in 1990 when he purchased the ranch with a partnership, The Conaway Conservancy Group a partnership between Yolo Conservators and PG&E Properties. This partnership owned the property from 1990 to 1994. Under Steve’s direction the farm hired a full-time wildlife manager for the property and developed a *Conaway Wildlife Plan*, which is virtually unheard of in California agriculture today. That wildlife manager has been in place for the past 14 years implementing Steve’s vision of wildlife friendly agriculture and the *Conaway Wildlife Plan* is still the guiding document for day-to-day operations on the 17,000 acre ranch.

In 1994 PG&E Properties bought out Yolo Conservator’s interest in the property. During this period Steve maintained his ties to the ranch by leasing the hunting rights from PG&E for 9 years. During this period, he remained connected to the ranch and acted as an unofficial advisor to PG&E Properties who continued the wildlife friendly agriculture programs initiated under the Conaway Conservancy Group in the early 1990’s. Throughout this period, the wildlife manager originally hired by Steve and the wildlife management plan implemented by him remained in effect.

In 2004 Steve Gidaro again purchased the Conaway Ranch through a different partnership, the Conaway Preservation Group. Throughout the past 15 years Steve’s land stewardship has set an example; his love of the Conaway Ranch has not wavered and his message has been consistent: Conaway Ranch has been and will continue to be managed for wildlife friendly agriculture!

## B. The Conaway Wildlife Plan

The core of the wildlife friendly agriculture philosophy is captured in the *Conaway Wildlife Plan* and Guiding Principles. Written in 1990 under Steve's direction, it has been in place for 15 years, being updated and revised continually to better meet the needs of wildlife. Examples of wildlife friendly practices include:

- When ditches are cleaned on the ranch, vegetation is removed from only one side of the ditch with the other side providing cover and habitat for wildlife.
- Broad application of herbicides is not allowed between road edges and crop fields. This is to allow small islands and corridors of wildlife habitat to be interspersed between crop fields to provide safe haven for birds and mammals.
- Spot spraying of particularly noxious weeds such as star thistle must be completed in early spring before waterfowl and upland game birds begin nesting to avoid disturbance to incubating hens.
- Where possible perennial grass cover is planted on roadsides to provide nesting and escape cover for birds and other wildlife. This is done to minimize encroachment of noxious weeds that require chemical controls.
- Lease farmers cutting alfalfa are required to use flushing bars on their swathers to prevent incubating hens from being killed. This saves the hens, and where possible the surviving eggs are donated to the egg salvage programs throughout the Central Valley.
- Idle set-aside fields are scattered throughout the ranch and left unfarmed from March to August to provide save nesting cover for ducks, pheasants, and other ground-nesting birds.
- Brood ponds are managed at strategic locations throughout the ranch from March to August to provide rearing habitat for ducklings and other wetland-dependent species.
- As rice fields are drained in mid to late August to allow harvest, drain water is moved to other farm fields to provide early migration habitat for waterfowl migrating down from Canada and Alaska.
- Food crops for wildlife are specifically planted for wildlife including seed crops (corn and milo) and moist soil plants such as water grass, smartweed, sprangle top, and bulrush. These fields are flooded in the fall to provide feed for wintering waterfowl.

- Winter water for waterfowl is provided by flooding approximately 7,000 acres of rice stubble providing one of the most significant feeding and resting stops on the Pacific Flyway.

### C. Partnerships

Steve's vision and success in managing the Conaway Ranch and other properties in then Yolo Basin could not have happened without the cooperation and assistance of numerous federal, state, and local agencies as well as environmental organizations. Examples include:

- In 1998-1999, in cooperation with the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) Steve enrolled in the Ag-Waterfowl Enhancement Program (B-22) administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and flooded 4,522 acres of rice to provide feed and resting habitat for wintering waterfowl.
- At the request of the Yolo County Supervisors, the Central Valley Joint Venture was asked in November, 1991 to take the lead in developing a plan or vision for wildlife habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement in the Yolo Bypass, a study area encompassing 110,000 acres. This effort spanned a period of over 2 years and resulted in the publication of a Suitability Analysis for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat in the Yolo Basin. The California Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Conaway Conservancy under Steve's Gidaro's lead paid for this effort. This document served as an early planning tool for many projects in the Bypass including the Vic Fazio Yolo Bypass State Wildlife Area.
- In cooperation with the Department of Water Resources, Conaway Ranch entered into and participated in a groundwater recharge study in 1991 that involved the flooding of 10,000 acres of farm land and led to new insights regarding conjunctive uses of surface and groundwater resources on the ranch.
- Conaway Ranch has been actively cooperating in several egg salvage programs in the Central Valley and assisted the City of Davis in getting started with egg salvage on their overland flow property next to the ranch.
- Conaway Ranch is cooperating with the CAL-FED Program to eventually ensure that their primary water pumping station on the Sacramento River has appropriate fish screens to minimize fish mortality, particularly anadromous salmon, steelhead, and other endangered species such as Delta smelt.

#### D. Outreach

Steve Gidaro is proud of what has been accomplished on Conaway Ranch and routinely opens the gates of the ranch for special tours. Groups include:

- Yolo Audubon Society
- Sacramento Audubon Society
- California Rice Commission
- California Waterfowl Association
- Ducks Unlimited
- University of California, Davis
- Central Valley Joint Venture
- Wildlife Conservation Board
- Yolo Basin Foundation
- California Duck Days
- California Department of Fish and Game
- Yolo County Resource Conservation District
- Reclamation Board
- Department of Water Resources
- Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Yolo County Farm Bureau

#### E. Education and Youth Programs

Steve Gidaro has a strong interest in supporting youth programs particularly those aimed at outdoor education and wildlife. Through the years he has opened Conaway Ranch for tours and activities by numerous youth groups including:

- Yolo Basin Discover the Flyway Program
- Willow Creek 4-H
- Boy Scouts (wood duck nesting boxes)
- Yolo County elementary school groups
- American River College
- UC Davis, Wildlife Department
- Explorit Science Center
- Tierra Del Oro Brownie Troop 65

In addition to providing tours, Steve supports youth activities by regularly making donations to

- California Waterfowl Association's (CWA) Kids Camp
- Donating Youth Waterfowl Hunts on Conaway Ranch through CWA
- Sponsoring student interns for duck banding

- The Yolo Basin Foundation through their annual “Bucks for Ducks and “Duck Days” events.

#### F. Research

Steve Gidaro has long believed and supported the idea that the Conaway Ranch is an outdoor laboratory where new ideas can be tested for both agriculture and wildlife. In this regard he has allowed many research projects to be conducted on the ranch including:

- In 1999 UC Davis conducted a radio telemetry study on wood ducks to determine survival rates and mortality factors
- In 1991-92 in cooperation with the California Waterfowl Association, a research study was conducted to determine invertebrate densities in three different types of farm fields—burned rice stubble, unburned stubble, and fallow set-aside lands.
- In 1991 the California State Legislature, in an effort to improve air quality in the Central Valley passed the Rice Straw Burning Reduction Act to phase out the use of fire as a means for managing rice stubble. The rice industry quickly sought alternative means of managing waste stubble through the invention and use of the “rice roller” an innovative piece of farm equipment that pushes the stubble into the mud where it is decomposed. To acknowledge and celebrate this major achievement, the Secretary of Interior, Bruce Babbitt, in cooperation with Ducks Unlimited held a press briefing and tour on the Conaway Ranch where the rice roller was being used.
- From 1991 to the present, the California Waterfowl Association has been conducting waterfowl nesting studies and duck banding to determine nest densities, hatching success, fledging rates, and sources of duckling mortality. This includes active participation in CWA’s Wood Duck Program for 15 years with assistance from UC Davis students.
- In 1995, California Department of Fish and Game and the California Waterfowl Association in cooperation with the Conaway Ranch, initiated a research study to design flushing bars on farm equipment, particularly swathers, to minimize hen mortality (primarily mallards and pheasants) in alfalfa fields when they are mowed for hay
- In 1991-92, in cooperation with UC Davis, the Conaway Ranch was used to test the viability of using the bacteria *Lagenidium sp.* as a non-chemical means of controlling mosquitoes
- In 1992-1993 in cooperation with Department of Water Resources and Yolo County, a 10,000-acre groundwater recharge study was conducted on the Conaway Ranch.

## II. OTHER PROPERTIES

Steve Gidaro's involvement in promoting wildlife friendly agriculture in the Yolo Basin has not been limited to the Conaway Ranch. Through various partnerships and leases, Steve has:

- Purchased the Laurel G Duck Club in the south Yolo Bypass and constructed 500 acres of new wetlands on former farm fields through the Wetlands Reserve Program administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- Purchased and enhanced the 600 acre Silva & Fuller (S&F) property in the north Yolo Bypass for deer, quail, pheasants, doves, and waterfowl by creating food plots, wetlands, and other habitat improvements
- Leased the 2,400-acre Swanston property adjacent to the Conaway Ranch from 1989-1992 and enhanced winter and spring habitat for waterfowl by planting nesting habitat and food plots.
- Purchased the 480 acre Senator Outing Duck Club in 1984 and enhanced it by doing wetland construction, wildlife habitat improvements, and state conservation easements.

## III. AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Steve Gidaro's dedication to wildlife friendly agriculture philosophy and good land stewardship has not gone unnoticed. Through the years he and the employees at Conaway Ranch have received several awards including:

- 2004 and 2000 Donor Award from the California Waterfowl Association
- 2003, The Malcolm D. King Award for Exceptional Wildlife Friendly Agricultural Practices from the California Waterfowl Association
- 2000 two awards to Mike Hall, Conaway Wildlife Manager, from CWA for his work with the Yolo County Chapter of California Waterfowl Association
- 1996- A Corporate Stewardship Award from the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture for demonstrating and implementing wildlife friendly agriculture on the ranch
- 1994-The Agricultural Wildlife Award from the California Waterfowl Association

- 1994- The Waterfowl Steward Award to Mike Hall, Conaway Wildlife Manager, from the California Waterfowl Association

#### IV. CLOSING REMARKS

Steve Gidaro has a 15-year history in the Yolo Basin buying land and improving it for wildlife and hunting. He has been an exemplary leader in the field of promoting his vision of wildlife friendly agriculture where land can be farmed for a profit yet do it in an environmentally sensitive way. His vision for the Conaway Ranch is to continue this philosophy of land management through the Conaway Preservation Group using conservation easements, mitigation banks, and other innovative strategies to provide a return for the investors while keeping the ranch in open space where agriculture and wildlife can co-exist.