

WHEP program a win-win for California rice, waterbirds

Montna Farms a conservation leader

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Supporters of the California rice industry and waterfowl habitat include, from left: Jon Munger, Paul Buttner, Tim Hermansen, Anita Brown, Alan Atkins, and David Sanden.

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[Montna Farms](#) is in the second year of a three-year contract in the NRCS' [Waterbird Habitat Enhancement Program](#) (WHEP). The voluntary program is designed to help rice production and waterbirds successfully co-exist in California's Sacramento and northern San Joaquin valleys.

Montna Farms, located in the Sacramento Valley's Sutter County, is owned and operated by Al and Gail Montna and their two daughters. The vertically-integrated farm grows super premium Japanese short-grain rice with a rice-drying operation onsite on Highway 99, halfway between Sacramento and Yuba City.

"The Waterbird Habitat Enhancement Program is a win-win for rice production and wildlife," said Jon Munger, Montna Farms' manager of operations. "The program requires some extra work on the grower end but it is worth the effort."

Participating landowners in the WHEP program receive financial incentives to implement pro-wildlife habitat improvements on rice land which in turn can improve rice production.

Munger, NRCS officials, and Paul Buttner of the [California Rice Commission](#) (CRC) discussed the rice industry -NRCS partnership at Montna Farms in mid March.

The two valleys are home to California's estimated 500,000 acres of rice ground and about 2,500 rice growers. The rice belt is located in the Pacific Flyway where birds stop to nest during the winter months.

"WHEP is an incredibly successful program with rice producers who want to further improve the wildlife habitat in their working landscape," said Tim Hermansen, NRCS wildlife biologist based in Colusa.

The program was developed with input from biologists with Audubon and PRBO Conservation Science to ensure that land would provide habitat critical for winter waterbird populations.

When WHEP practices are implemented, Hermansen noted, "Some farmers in the program see more birds in their fields than ever before."

Wintering waterbirds in the region fall into three categories: waterfowl, including ducks, geese, and swans; shore birds - sandpipers, dowitchers, avocets, and stilts; and wading birds including herons, egrets, and cranes.

Among the WHEP practices include wildlife-friendly straw management techniques, plus the placement of water boards in rice boxes (fields) after harvest to collect additional water.

Rainfall in the Sacramento Valley ranges from 17-25 inches annually.

In addition, modifications to rice check berms create nesting islands for birds. Another practice enhances the duration and types of fall and early spring habitat created when fields are intentionally flooded during the winter.

Alan Atkins, NRCS district conservationist based in Yuba City, explained the WHEP practice of draining water off the fields over the entire month of February, instead of all at once, in preparation for spring field work.

The waterbirds begin to leave rice-growing areas in early February. Since the birds leave gradually, Atkins says field water is drained at 25 percent per week. All water is removed by March 1.

Munger explained, "It takes more time and labor to remove the water but the NRCS incentive payment helps to defray the cost."

Once dry, Montana farm fields are planted by airplane at a seeding rate of 100-125 pounds per acre. Planting usually begins in mid April. Harvest usually runs from late August through October.

For implementing WHEP practices, NRCS provides financial incentives to contracted growers in the three-year agreement. WHEP contracts cannot be renewed. The hope is growers will continue the practices after the contract expires.

"We are not trying to take agricultural land out of production or trying to stop rice farming," Hermansen said. "We are working with agriculture in a win-win situation which improves waterbird habitat and benefits agriculture."

Waterbirds also contribute to successful rice production and reduce water use in rice production. After harvest, the rice straw left in the fields is disked into the soil. The fields are flooded to help decompose the straw.

After flooding, waterbirds mix the straw into the soil. This creates a higher organic soil content which in turn better holds water in the field. The end result is reduced water use in rice production.

"We wouldn't be able to do all of these great practices for waterbirds without the funding and technical support from NRCS," said Paul Buttner, the CRC's environmental affairs manager.

Launched in 2011 as the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, the program included 71 grower contracts covering 28,000 acres in the [Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District](#). Funding for the initial year was \$2.6 million.

Last year, the program was renamed as the Waterbird Habitat Enhancement Program and expanded into Butte, Sutter, Yuba, and Yolo counties. NRCS funded about new 125 contracts covering about 78,000 acres at a cost of \$6.2 million.

This year, NRCS will expand WHEP into Placer and Sacramento counties with \$1.5 million in total contract funds for the eight-county area. About 70 applications were received by the mid February cutoff date. The number of approved contracts was not available at press time.

The WHEP program is funded through the Bay Delta Initiative, part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Another WHEP practice addresses the cold water from rivers and reservoirs delivered in the springtime by some water delivery districts for rice production. The cold water can stunt rice plants and reduce rice yields in the 50 percent range.

Under WHEP, these production areas are temporarily removed from rice production for conversion into critical habitat ponds for bird brood rearing. The grower receives payment for the conversion to offset the value of lost rice yields.

Buttner said, "This allows the area to serve as a warming check for the rice grower. This is a great practice strongly supported by the California Rice Commission."

Overall, Buttner says many California rice operations support waterbird habitat and contribute to waterbird preservation.

"If California rice fields ceased to exist, another 235,000 acres would be needed to create wetlands at an estimated cost of \$1.5 billion with another \$30 million needed annually to maintain it," Buttner said.

Montna Farms is dedicated to conservation. In 2007, the Montna family installed a 390 kilowatt solar system which provides more than 50 percent of the power needs for the farm's rice dryer. Al Montna received the 2010 Leopold Conservation Award, sponsored in part by the Sand County Foundation.

"Everything we do on the farm revolves around conservation," Munger said. "We are avid 'waterfowlers and are supporters of Ducks Unlimited, the California Waterfowl Association, and other conservation organizations which support conservation programs which help preserve the environment."

Munger joined Montna Farms 12 years ago and remembers occasionally seeing a white-faced ibis flying around the farm.

"Today we see flocks of ibis. The entire rice industry has always provided wildlife habitat over the years but today provides an even better habitat with improved management practices."

In 2001, Montna Farms signed a conservation easement on about 1,100 acres – a two-mile stretch along Highway 99. The agreement was the first conservation working-lands easement in California tied to waterbird habitat. The easement means the farmland can never be commercially developed.

Munger smiled, "There will never be a Wal-Mart on this land."

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