

INFORMATION SHEET

SAN LUIS & DELTA MENDOTA WATER AUTHORITY
AND UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
GRASSLAND BYPASS CHANNEL PROJECT
FRESNO AND MERCED COUNTIES

The Grassland Bypass Channel Project is operated by the San Luis and Delta Mendota Water Authority (Authority) and uses a portion of the San Luis Drain, which is owned by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau). Within the Authority, a Drainage Activity Agreement has set up a group called the Grassland Area Farmers for the purposes of implementing the project. This group includes seven irrigation and drainage districts and several adjacent areas. The participants are: Charleston Drainage District, Pacheco Water District, Panoche Drainage District, Broadview Water District, Firebaugh Canal Water District, Widrin Water District, and the Camp 13 Drainage Area (which is part of the Central California Irrigation District).

The project has a capacity of 150 cubic feet per second and discharges drainage from approximately 97,000 acres of agricultural land to Mud Slough (north) at a point six miles upstream of the San Joaquin River. Historically, this drainage reached the San Joaquin River via Mud Slough (north) or Salt Slough, but was routed through various channels in the Grassland Water District (GWD). These channels are also used to supply water to wetlands within the GWD and the dual use of the channels as both drainage and supply canals was limiting the ability to provide good quality water to the wetlands. The project removes the subsurface agricultural drainage from the 97,000 acre service area from channels that supply wetlands.

Drainage from the project service area has been routed through a new facility called the Grassland Bypass Channel, to the San Luis Drain. From there, it travels 28 miles to the Drain's terminus and discharges to Mud Slough (north). The San Luis Drain has been blocked above the Grassland Bypass Channel to prevent the introduction of other drainage flows.

Through most of the year, the discharge primarily consists of subsurface agricultural drainage that is high in salts, selenium, boron and other constituents. The system is also designed to handle irrigation tailwater and local stormwater runoff. During the winters of 1997 and 1998, flood waters from Panoche Creek and other west side streams entered the project service area, commingled with local drainage, and were discharged via the project and Grassland Water District channels.

The project, which went into operation in September 1996, is consistent with the Basin Plan program for the control of subsurface agricultural drainage from the Grassland Watershed. This program focuses on selenium and generally prohibits the discharge of subsurface drainage to wetland channels after 10 January 1997. It places a limit on the loads of selenium that can be discharged to the San Joaquin River and states that WDRs will be used to control discharges of agricultural

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subsurface drainage from the Grassland Watershed. There is a compliance timetable that gives dischargers until 1 October 2010 to meet the selenium objective in Mud Slough (north). To back this up, there is also a prohibition of discharge that applies to agricultural subsurface drainage discharges effective 1 October 2010 unless selenium water quality objectives are being met:

The monthly selenium load limits for this project were recommended in a November 1995 letter to the Board's chairman from the Authority, Bureau, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This letter recommends that the Board take a number of actions regarding the control of selenium discharges to the San Joaquin River, including the issuance of waste discharge requirements containing specific load limits. The goal of the limits is to obtain a 15% reduction in the amount of selenium discharged during the first five years of operation. This Order is consistent with most of the recommendations in this letter.

While selenium is the primary concern, the drainage also contains boron, molybdenum, high levels of salts and other constituents that can impact receiving waters. The Basin Plan specifies the beneficial uses for Mud Slough (north) and contains numerical objectives for boron and molybdenum as well as narrative water quality objectives that apply to this water body. This Order requires preparation of management plans addressing the steps that will be taken to achieve compliance with these objectives.

The Grassland Bypass Channel Project is a short term or interim project that will operate for a maximum of five years. An extensive, multi-agency monitoring program has been established to evaluate the impacts of the project. Any proposal to discharge drainage after the five year period would be considered a different project and will need a new environmental assessment under the California Environmental Quality Act.

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