

# CALIFORNIA'S WILDLIFE HABITAT AND ECOSYSTEM

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## ***The State Needs to Improve Its Land Acquisition Planning and Oversight***

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### ***Audit Highlights . . .***

*Although various entities acquire land for ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation, the State does not have a comprehensive land use policy that provides a common vision of goals and objectives that these entities can follow.*

- The two state departments that are acquiring the most land for these purposes—the Department of Fish and Game and the Department of Parks and Recreation—have not performed key tasks for managing these properties. Specifically, they:*
  - Have not prepared management plans for at least one-third of their properties.*
  - Use outdated management plans for many properties.*
  - Inadequately manage some land because they have not achieved certain management objectives or undertaken specific projects.*
  - Insufficiently document their management efforts.*
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At the request of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, we reviewed the state entities that acquire land for ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation, both within and independent of the CALFED Bay-Delta Program (Calfed). However, Calfed does not acquire land for these purposes. State entities that do acquire land for environmental purposes include the Department of Fish and Game (Fish and Game) and the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Each of the many entities that acquire land, including state and federal agencies and private and nonprofit organizations, has a process for selecting and acquiring land to accomplish its individual mission and objectives, but a uniform statewide process for acquiring land does not exist. Our review revealed the following:

### **Finding #1: The State does not have an overall plan for coordinating acquisition of land for wildlife habitat preservation and ecosystem restoration.**

As early as 1970, the Legislature directed the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) to oversee land use planning and to prepare a statewide environmental goals and policies report. However, the OPR has not developed a comprehensive land use policy, and it has not issued a new or updated goals and policies report since 1978, despite state law requiring that such a report be produced every four years. Without a statewide land use policy, the state entities have no clear central vision to ensure that their decisions for acquiring land are compatible with the State's goals and objectives for preserving and restoring the environment.

To ensure that it fulfills its responsibility for developing a statewide land use policy, we recommended that the OPR:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive approach for addressing statewide land use planning. Inherent in this mission should be the development of an overall plan for the State to acquire land for ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation.
- Identify resources it can use from projects and studies already performed by other entities and consider this data when developing its approach.
- Project staffing and resource requirements it needs to fulfill its mandates, and seek additional staff and resources as necessary.
- Update the statewide environmental goals and policies report and continue to update this report every four years as state law dictates.

***OPR Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

The OPR is in the process of developing a comprehensive interagency approach to future state land use issues, as part of a new environmental goals and policies report. Although this report will include much broader issues than wildlife habitat and restoration alone, plans for acquiring and managing state land for ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation will be addressed.

The OPR is in the process of developing an inventory of programs administered by state agencies and will evaluate each agency on its mission, goals, and programs. The OPR also has identified 14 state functional plans that directly relate to its environmental goals and policies report and plans to participate in the development of these plans. Thus far, the OPR is participating in the development of the State's transportation and water plans. In addition, the OPR developed the California Planning Information Network (CalPIN), a web-based tool to gather information from local government planning agencies regarding local land use issues and trends.

In August and September 2000, the OPR hired two additional land use planners, bringing the total number of planners to four. In January 2001, the OPR also hired a director for the rural policy task force program. In addition, the OPR reported that it added new staff to its Policy and Research Unit in February 2001. The OPR reports that it will also try to persuade other state agencies to allocate resources for a comprehensive effort.

The OPR reports that it has made important progress toward the development of a new environmental goals and policy report. However, it identified major impediments to the timely, successful completion of the report such as the lack of staffing; cost and time of collecting and analyzing data; lack of availability and assistance from other state agency staff; other state priorities (i.e., energy); and the State's overall fiscal constraints.

**Finding #2: The State does not have a comprehensive inventory system to facilitate statewide land use planning.**

Many state entities maintain inventories of land they own. But the State does not have a comprehensive system to facilitate statewide land use planning by readily identifying land acquired for specific purposes, including ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation.

We recommended that the OPR work with other state entities to ensure that a composite inventory of land the State owns exists and that the inventory includes information on the purpose for which each property was acquired.

***OPR Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

The OPR reports that it has worked diligently with the Department of General Services (DGS) to expand the Statewide Property Inventory (SPI) database to make it a more useful tool for the identification and management of state properties. Also, in response to the current energy situation, the OPR developed a State Owned Land Energy Review Task Force to assist in the identification of State lands that could be made available for peaker generation facilities. This information was input into the SPI. Further, on OPR's behalf, the California State University, Sacramento completed a preliminary study, An Inventory Study of the State of California's Land Holdings, in May 2001.

**Finding #3: Neither Fish and Game nor the DPR prepare a management plan for each property they acquire and they do not regularly update existing management plans.**

Fish and Game and the DPR have not completed management plans for 318 (50 percent) of their 632 properties and parks. Management plans, the essential first step of proper land management, identify the natural resources present and the goals or strategies for maintaining each property for the purpose it was intended. In addition, although Fish and Game requires a review of its land

management plans at least every 5 years, 128 (86 percent) of its 149 completed plans were more than five years old. Similarly, almost half of the DPR's 165 existing general plans had not been updated for more than 15 years and 51 were more than 20 years old. By not updating these plans, the departments cannot ensure that they are complying with relevant environmental laws or considering other relevant factors relating to the proper use of the land.

We recommended that Fish and Game and DPR prepare final plans for all of their properties and parks that describe goals and strategies for managing the land. We also recommended that Fish and Game and DPR update their older land management or general plans.

***Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

According to Fish and Game, updating and completing management plans for all existing properties is an ongoing high-priority task for the department's Lands and Facilities Branch. Fish and Game is developing a database to catalog management activities on its properties and produce standardized data for management plans. In addition, another database used to extract and enter baseline biological data into the plans, is almost complete. Fish and Game expects that these two databases will expedite plan development. Fish and Game reported that 9 management plans are currently being developed and staff are scheduled to revise 59 plans by the end of fiscal year 2003–04.

The DPR has begun the management plan development and update process and has hired additional staff.

**Finding #4: Fish and Game and DPR did not adequately manage some land.**

For three of four properties managed by Fish and Game and three of the six DPR restoration projects we reviewed, the departments did not meet certain objectives. Consistent and thorough management of acquired land is essential for ongoing benefits. Moreover, delays in restoring or maintaining land may also result in additional problems. In the past, insufficient funding has hampered the departments' management efforts. However, Fish and Game and the DPR have recently received additional funds for certain land management activities.

We recommended that Fish and Game and the DPR perform restoration, rehabilitation, and improvement projects, as well as periodic inspections of all land, in accordance with their land management or general plans. In addition, Fish and Game and the DPR should continue to request additional funding to ensure that land acquired for ecosystem restoration and wildlife habitat preservation is kept in its desired condition.

We also recommended that the Legislature consider establishing a mechanism in future bond acts involving land acquisitions that sets aside a portion of the proceeds for major maintenance projects. Moreover, the Legislature should consider establishing a mechanism to ensure that ongoing management of land acquired with the bond money is funded; for example it could create a designated revenue stream or require the departments to establish a plan for demonstrating how those ongoing costs will be met before acquiring the land.

***Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

Fish and Game did not specifically address our recommendation to perform restoration, rehabilitation, and improvement projects, as well as periodic inspections of all land in its one-year response.

The DPR has hired additional staff to help manage park improvement projects. In addition, the DPR has developed procedures for conducting periodic, routine inspections of natural resource conditions. The DPR has received significant funding to perform restoration, rehabilitation, and improvement projects. The DPR believes that this funding will have a positive impact on its ability to increase ongoing natural resource inspections, monitoring, and corrective actions.

***Legislative Action: Unknown.***

To ensure that ongoing management of land acquired with bond money is funded, Assembly Bill 1414 proposes changes that will require the Resources Agency, until January 1, 2010, to prepare an annual report summarizing expenditures on the California Clean Water, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2002, if that act is enacted by the Legislature during the 2001–02 Regular Session of the Legislature.

**Finding #5: Fish and Game and the DPR maintain insufficient documentation of their management efforts.**

Although Fish and Game developed a standard monitoring report for inspecting progress, the report does not capture information on whether staff are meeting the goals and objectives of land management plans. During our audit, Fish and Game told us that it recognizes that its land managers use varying methods and it plans to develop a statewide reporting format to foster greater consistency. Until it completes this tool and incorporates a component that addresses whether its management activities meet the goals and objectives of land management plans, it cannot ensure that sufficient documentation exists to verify its land management activities. Similarly, the DPR does not have uniform standards for monitoring its parks. The DPR was aware of this problem and had prepared a draft natural resource inventory monitoring and assessment guideline. Without standard procedures, park district staff cannot track and maintain information in a uniform manner, and the DPR cannot properly oversee its land management efforts.

We recommended that Fish and Game should develop and implement procedures for documenting its land management activities that address goals and objectives of its land management plans. We also recommended that the DPR should complete and implement its draft guidelines for standard, uniform monitoring procedures.

***Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.***

Fish and Game is developing a database to catalog management activities on its lands and produce standardized data for management plans.

The DPR is collecting system-wide monitoring information on the status of key resource factors on all State Park Systems units.