Late February brought the unthinkable – the State Water Resources Control Board was considering zero surface water allocations for agriculture in response to the drought. The intervening weeks saw a groundswell of engagement from NCWA, irrigation districts, industry leaders and the CRC. While NCWA, GCID and many others engaged at a technical and political level, the job of the CRC was to generate support from our conservation friends and quantify the impacts of the proposed action. We were successful in executing our assigned duties, garnering letters from every one of our conservation partners: The Nature Conservancy, Audubon, Ducks Unlimited, Central Valley Joint Venture, Point Blue and many others. When rice was in jeopardy – they came through with strong support for the habitat provided on ricelands.

With hard work, the good fortune of several good storms and the great technical work of the water managers, recent results were stunning – full allocations on the Feather River and 75 percent allocations for the Central Valley Project.

At the risk of missing key players, the following individuals were vital to this success: Don Bransford, Al Montna, Charlie Hoppin, Fritz Durst, David Guy, Bryce Lundberg, Thad Bettner, Ted Trimble, Lewis Bair, Stuart Somach and many water district managers and counsel. Without their engagement and the outstanding technical work of the managers, the outcome would have been very different.

The real objective is in front of us. To ensure long-term future, we must assure that regulators and policy makers are never in the position again to sacrifice an entire segment of the economy to “solve” the drought.

For a start, we need more storage. In the Sacramento Valley, this means Sites Reservoir. It also means focusing on the message that water used for one purpose in California does not exclude its use for others.

The CRC will continue in its role of educating opinion leaders and communicating to the public on the need for Sites and also the multiple benefits of water used on our fields. We never want to be the segment of California sacrificed to meet the short-term needs of a state with long-term water problems.

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After several years of strong focus by the CRC on a new Farm Bill conservation program called the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP), the USDA took its first official action to designate eight areas in the country as Critical Conservation Areas. We are very pleased to announce that the Central Valley is one of these special regions, including all California rice fields.

This recognition follows our long process to demonstrate the ecosystem services value of California ricelands. It is gratifying that the USDA understands that value.

The USDA’s action means that our region will now share in specially dedicated conservation program funding to help support our continued commitment to waterbird conservation. We see this as a critical step in furthering programs we’ve developed in collaboration with our waterbird conservation partners and implemented with the essential partnership and funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The previous $10 million investment and commitment by NRCS to enroll over 100,000 rice acres into these practices likely played a key role in this designation. We greatly value this partnership, which makes California Rice more relevant to more Californians, and look forward to working with the NRCS and our many conservation partners to enhance waterbird habitat benefits.
Often times when we see agriculture in an urban setting it is in the form of a farmers’ market or a farm-to-fork event trumpeting the virtues of local agriculture. Once in a while agriculture will be mentioned as being great for exports but that is about it. Production Ag is seen as something that occurs out in the countryside and beyond the general interest of the urban populace. Due to the leadership of Valley Vision, The Sacramento Area Council of Governments and the Sacramento Metro Chamber – all that has changed in our region.

A recent example of the region grabbing the hand of agriculture came at the Metro Chamber’s annual Capitol-to-Cap event that brought 300 business leaders and local elected officials to Washington, D.C.

Of the 17 issue papers presented at the over 200 meetings on Capitol Hill and with the Administration, four were the primary focus – water resources, the Trans Pacific Partnership, higher education and innovation. Agriculture and specifically the CRC was asked to author the papers on water resources and the TPP.

If this was not enough, the guest speaker at the delegation lunch was none other than Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Imagine 300 urban leaders from Sacramento listening to a great address of the vital nature of agriculture in the U.S. and in California. Add some wonderful comments by Representative Doris Matsui on the great environmental stewardship of the California rice industry and it is clear that the region’s view of ag is far bigger than farmers’ markets.

The second example occurred in May again under the leadership of the Metro Chamber. Perspectives on Agriculture was the second annual event designed to connect urban and rural communities on issues that impact the region.

This year’s topic – water.

Again, the CRC was instrumental in developing the program, recruiting speakers and providing visual content for the event. The result was 600 community leaders hearing how important agriculture is to the environment, how well we use water and how important we are to the region’s economy.

The groundwork for this embrace of farmers, equipment dealers and food processors can be traced back to the early leadership of two groups. First was the Sacramento Area Counsel of Governments whose groundbreaking Rural Urban Connection Strategy mapped the rural portion of the region and identified what drove the economy. The answer surprised them – farms! Valley Vision then took this work and folded it into its Next Economy initiative highlighting agriculture as one of the key economic clusters in the region.
Armstrong & Getty return to Rice Country

There’s no better way to understand the shallow water depth of Sacramento Valley rice fields than seeing one firsthand. We recently took radio hosts Jack Armstrong and Joe Getty into a newly flooded Sutter County field to continue their immersion in all things rice.

Through their on-air testimonials, photos and videos, Armstrong and Getty continue to be one of our most significant methods of outreach to Legislators, regulators, decision makers, opinion leaders and media.

Their messages will continue to center on drought impacts from water cutbacks in the valley, water use efficiency and the benefit this industry provides to our economy, environment and cuisine.

An airplane from Farm Air Flying Service flew overhead during the Armstrong and Getty visit.

Legislative Day Program postponed

With a reduced crop due to drought and an increased media focus on California Rice, our Legislative Day Program has been postponed until next year.

Media inquiries have been running more than double since January, requiring a major time commitment to ensure our story is told correctly. Additionally, due to the hardships associated with the drought, it became clear that we needed to hold off on Legislative Day and associated events this year.

We are already planning next year’s event, including completion of two rice country paintings by artist Phil Gross. Legislative Day and the California Rice Boxes offer a tremendous outreach opportunity for our industry. We look forward to their successful return next year.

Deadlines fast approaching for 2014/15 Board Elections

The CRC election cycle has begun for the 2014/15 board elections. In the coming weeks, growers will have an opportunity to nominate individuals to serve on the CRC Board for three-year terms. Nomination forms and information on the seats open in each district will be mailed to every grower by June 13. Nomination forms must be returned or postmarked by July 15, 2014.

If you do not receive information for nominating board members shortly after June 13, please contact the CRC office immediately at (916) 387-2264, so we may ensure that a ballot is mailed to you.
The CRC continues its longstanding relationship with the Pacific Flyway Decoy Association (www.pacificflyway.org) by co-sponsoring its upcoming Wildlife Art Festival scheduled for July 12 and 13 at the Doubletree Hotel in Sacramento.

This year we have sponsored two competitive carving events. The talented carvers in the group will square off to see who the first-place carvers will be for their skillful renditions this year’s riceland birds.

The CRC’s longstanding “shorebird” category will be a Killdeer for this year. This bird is a staple in and around rice fields. Many growers have taken to helping to protect these birds by cordoning off areas where the birds are nesting, sometimes even on gravel roadways!

Our second category this year will be the beautiful Sandhill Crane. This will be smaller than the real, life-sized versions, of course, since these birds can grow to nearly four feet tall! We are asking for them to be between 18 to 20 inches tall for this carving competition.

As always, all CRC members are invited to the event with complimentary admission. Just cut out your ticket (at right) and come experience the amazing artwork that will be on display.