Madera County Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program: La Vina Pilot Project

White Paper

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Madera County includes portions of three Critically Overdrafted groundwater Subbasins (Madera, Chowchilla, and Delta Mendota), with most of the groundwater pumping occurring within the Madera and Chowchilla Subbasins. Fourteen Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) are working to implement Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) in the county, including the Madera County GSA which is responsible for managing groundwater use and implementing the GSP for county lands that are outside of irrigation district and city boundaries.

GSAs in Madera County have been developing and implementing a series of projects and management actions to achieve sustainable groundwater conditions by 2040. This includes projects to bring in additional surface water supplies to offset groundwater use or to benefit groundwater recharge with potential partner agencies in addition to well mitigation programs. Madera County GSA has also been proactively working on demand management actions to more than halve current groundwater pumping within its boundaries. Demand management actions include a groundwater allocation framework, evaluation of potential groundwater markets/trading, and several targeted land repurposing programs.

In 2022 Madera County was awarded $10 million by the California Department of Conservation (DOC) through the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP). This grant supports land repurposing efforts in the county to transition currently irrigated agricultural lands—across potentially all GSAs—to alternative, lower-water-use land uses that generate additional public benefits. Madera County developed and is now implementing a Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan (MALRP) that facilitates the distribution of the DOC grant funds.

An initial pilot project, called the La Vina project and located in the Madera Irrigation District, was developed and funded by the Madera County MLRP. This white paper describes the process for developing the La Vina project, how it was implemented, and key lessons. It emphasizes that successful land repurposing projects like La Vina must make financial sense for the landowner and then consider how community interests align and could be successfully incorporated into a viable project design.

2. What is the La Vina Pilot Project?

The La Vina project is an agricultural land repurposing project in Madera County that was initiated by the landowner to address operational challenges and create water savings on a portion of a farm bordering a local community. The landowner worked with the Madera County Farm Bureau (Farm Bureau) and the Madera Ag Water Association (MAWA), and eventually the Madera/Chowchilla Resource Conservation District (RCD), to develop the project concept and ultimately bring it to the Madera MLRP team. Located on the Davis Diversified Farms property within Madera Irrigation District, the project includes just over 5 acres of irrigated almond and walnut orchard bordering the community of La Vina. The project removes the trees,

providing groundwater savings benefits, and replaces it with pollinator habitat and native plants, providing habitat, air quality, and local community benefits.

2.1 How Was Landowner Successfully Engaged?

The La Vina project was conceived as a pilot for the Madera MLRP early on in the program's development process. Based on initial outreach and engagement activities with program partners and key stakeholder entities, such as the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, the potential for MLRP to incentivize a "community buffer" project in La Vina was identified. A community buffer is a designated area between agricultural land and residential or sensitive zones, like schools, designed to provide a distance between agricultural operations and residential developments while, potentially, offering opportunities for habitat or recreational use (Fernandez Bou et al 2022). Specifically, the project was initiated by the Farm Bureau when Executive Director Christina Beckstead who saw the opportunity to address longstanding tensions between landowner (Davis Diversified Farms, or "DDF") and La Vina residents. Due to their long-standing and trusted relationship, Ms. Beckstead, along with representatives from MAWA, facilitated initial conversations with the landowner about creating a buffer zone on a portion of the land that could simultaneously address landowner operational concerns and community interests. This connection point between the landowner, Farm Bureau, and MAWA was instrumental in launching what would become a pilot project that would help shape and inform the Madera MLRP program approach and plan design.

Based on the trust established with the landowner by the Farm Bureau and MAWA, the Madera MLRP team worked collaboratively with the landowner and MLRP partners to develop a landowner-driven project plan and funding approach that considered landowner costs, community input, and created meaningful benefits.

2.2 What Does the Project Entail?

The La Vina project is a pilot land repurposing project in Madera County, implemented on a 5.27-acre portion of the Davis Diversified Farms almond and walnut orchard. It is located in the Madera Irrigation District, an area that has a generally reliable surface water supply and does not currently have any groundwater allocation. The 5.27 acres footprint includes portions of two blocks of established orchards on the Davis Diversified Farms property including:

- Approximately 25 acres of almonds planted in 2016
- Approximately 10 acres of walnuts planted in 2016

The project footprint (see Figure 1) borders the La Vina area, a small farmworker community in the County surrounded by irrigated farmland that evolved from the John Brown Colony of the late 1890s. It is bordered to the north by Ave 9 and to the east by Road 24. As represented in Figure 1, the project removes rows of trees in the orchard blocks directly south of the La Vina homes on Uvas Ave and south and east of the residential development on Casas De La Vina.

The project includes removing approximately 6 rows of walnut trees and 5 rows of almond trees that directly border the community. The land is repurposed into pollinator habitat for the duration of the 10-year MLRP contract, providing multiple benefits to the community by reducing dust and noise near homes, reducing water use by removing trees, and providing habitat for pollinators.

A habitat plan for the La Vina project was developed by the landowner in partnership with the Madera/Chowchilla Resource Conservation District and Xerces Society. The plan generally includes two hedgerows: a large 2,000-foot-long hedgerow with native shrubs like coyote brush, elderberry, and toyon along the community-facing edge, and a smaller 270-foot hedgerow near Avenue 9 with pollinator-friendly shrubs and forbs to improve visual appeal. The habitat plan also includes plantings to further reduce dust and enhance biodiversity.

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the La Vina project footprint. It shows the location of the existing orchards, La Vina community, and trees that would be removed (highlighted).

Figure 1. La Vina Project Footprint

The La Vina project is in the Madera Irrigation District (MID) Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) and has access to both surface water from the district and well water. The MID GSA does not currently have a groundwater allocation. The landowner can fully irrigate the parcel in the absence of this project. By removing trees and switching to pollinator habitat, the project provides a groundwater savings benefit for the Madera Subbasin.

2.3 What Was the Dynamic Between the Landowner and the Community?

The relationship between Davis Diversified Farms and the La Vina community was characterized by tensions that had developed over several years. La Vina is a small economically

disadvantaged unincorporated community providing affordable housing for agricultural workers. The community's residential areas directly abutted Davis Diversified Farm's almond and walnut orchards with no buffer zone. Figure 2 illustrates the La Vina project location, showing the proximity of the established orchard to the residential housing fence line.

Figure 2. La Vina Project Orchards and Residential Fenceline

For approximately two years prior to the Madera MLRP project, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability (Leadership Counsel) had been working with La Vina residents who reported concerns about adjacent agricultural operations. Like many other small rural agricultural communities in the San Joaquin Valley, noise and dust (air quality) were expressed concerns, particularly during harvest seasons.

From the landowner's perspective, reasonable efforts were made to notify residents about standard agricultural operations. The landowner also faced operational challenges with dumping and unauthorized access points into the property presenting a liability risk. These activities created additional work for foreman and field staff that had to manage cleanup and security issues that weren't part of their regular duties.

Despite what seemed to be shared interest in finding solutions, direct communication between the Leadership Counsel (representing community concerns) and the landowner had been

unsuccessful prior to the Madera MLRP project. The Farm Bureau and MAWA's established relationship with Davis Diversified Farms created a trusted channel through which the concept of an MLRP buffer project could be introduced, bridging what had been an impasse between the parties.

2.4 What Co-Benefits Does the La Vina Project Generate?

The Madera County Multibenefit Agricultural Land Repurposing Plan (MALRP) requires that projects provide co-benefits in addition to groundwater savings. The La Vina Project delivers multiple co-benefits including:

- **Groundwater savings**: Estimated ~150 acre feet (AF) of reduced water use over 10 years.
- **Air quality improvement**: Reduces dust and noise from agricultural operations near homes through a vegetative buffer.
- **Habitat creation**: Establishes climate-resilient pollinator habitat using native drought-tolerant plants.
- **Community enhancement**: Beautifies frontage along Ave 9 with a hedgerow aligned with Madera County's pedestrian improvements.
- **Disadvantaged community benefit**: Designed in collaboration with the adjacent La Vina community, enhancing environmental quality and aesthetics.

While the community initially hoped for more extensive amenities, including public walking trails through the buffer zone, the final project design balanced landowner concerns about liability and practical design limitations with community desires for a walking space. Given the history of unauthorized access and landowner concerns about liability and maintenance, walking trails were not included in the final design. However, the pollinator habitat and hedgerows deliver substantial benefits that address core community and landowner concerns while respecting private property rights. The project does not include any public access, walkways, or other recreation facilities.

2.5 How Was the La Vina Project Implemented?

The project was developed in 2023 and 2024 and implementation started in 2025. Planting site preparation started in March of 2025, following tree removal. Implementation steps followed a phased approach:

- **The history of the community**. The La Vina community was originally established as farmworker housing, developed by Self-Help Enterprises, an organization that creates affordable housing throughout the Central Valley. The community consists of both a multi-family apartment complex and single-family homes, strategically located to provide residents with easy access to surrounding agricultural operations where many work. This proximity to agricultural land, while convenient for workforce access, created challenges when residential areas directly bordered active farming operations with no transition zone or buffer.

- **Initial conversation with the landowner**. The project idea started with the landowner working with Madera/Chowchilla Resource Conservation District (RCD), Farm Bureau and MAWA to address landowner concerns. They worked together to define the La Vina pilot concept and bring that initial concept to the MLRP project team.
- **Planning and Design**: Included site evaluation and project management by the Madera/Chowchilla RCD, a conservation plan developed by an RCD-facilitated grant with the Xerces Society, community outreach and engagement support by Leadership Counsel and Linguistica, and ensured alignment with MLRP programmatic goals by the Madera County MLRP administrative team. The project was also planned and designed in coordination with Madera County's La Vina mobility project, which was a separate pre-existing project slated for 2027 to install sidewalks, crosswalks, and streetlights.
- **Tree Removal and Site Prep**: Approximately 5.27 acres of almonds and walnuts were removed. Weed control and soil preparation methods such as solarization and mulching were applied.
- **Habitat Installation**: Two hedgerows were installed with native shrubs and forbs. A pollinator-friendly seed mix was applied in open areas.
- **Irrigation and Maintenance**: Drip irrigation was installed, with a 2–3-year plan for supplemental watering. Ongoing maintenance includes weed control and light pruning.
- **Contracting**: A 10-year contract was executed between Madera County and the landowner (Davis Diversified Farms) to implement the project and maintain the project area. This process also included DOC MLRP team approval (submission of the La Vina Project Packet).
- **Payments**: Incentive payments were issued to cover project costs after the contract was executed.

As described under Section 2.1, the planning and design of the La Vina Project included coordination between the Madera County MLRP team and the landowner, Davis Diversified Farms, to identify a portion of the orchard adjacent to the La Vina community for repurposing. Through site visits and discussions, the project footprint was refined to balance groundwater savings and project goals. The landowner worked with the Madera/Chowchilla RCD and Xerces Society to develop a habitat conservation plan that incorporated native plantings, hedgerows, and a 100-foot buffer zone. This defined the core scope of the project. Community and other stakeholder feedback was featured much later in the project planning process, and helped shape some of the final design concepts such as visual improvements along Avenue 9 and a habitat barrier to reduce dust.

The contracting process for the La Vina Project included close coordination between Madera County, the MLRP team, and the landowner to finalize the incentive payment structure, contract terms, and long-term management responsibilities. The MLRP technical team worked with the

landowner to calculate a reasonable incentive payment, including project costs, forgone returns, and compensation for other co-benefits. Contract terms include a 10-year commitment to maintain the habitat area and outlined allowable uses, monitoring requirements, and enforcement provisions. The project package—including the conservation plan, payment estimates, site access, and stakeholder engagement documentation—was submitted to the DOC for review and approval. After DOC's review and approval, a contract was executed between the landowner and the county, and the project was formally approved for MLRP funding.

The contracting phase for the La Vina Project also included developing a monitoring plan to ensure continued maintenance of the habitat area and compliance with MLRP requirements. In general, the landowner is responsible for maintaining the habitat according to the conservation plan (and contract), with periodic site inspections and photo documentation to track conditions and document the project completed by the county. Monitoring activities will also inform future land repurposing efforts in the county, under MALRP and potential future programs.

Project implementation (tree removal, site prep, habitat planting, irrigation and maintenance) started immediately upon contract execution. The landowner removed approximately six rows of walnut trees and five rows of almond trees directly bordering the residential areas, creating a 100-foot buffer zone. This included reconfiguring the field and irrigation system, with removal of lateral lines and emitters/sprinklers while preserving main lines. The project utilized solarization and sheet mulching techniques to suppress weeds before planting. Field work and site preparation was completed in early 2025, with pollinator habitat installation beginning in March 2025.

2.6 What Lessons Were Learned About the Inclusive Planning Approach?

A significant milestone in the project's implementation was bringing together the landowner and community representatives for the first time in joint site meetings, marking a breakthrough in what had previously been an unsuccessful dialogue. The March 28, 2025, Community Planting Day, planned and hosted by the RCD, (Figure 3) represented this collaborative approach, with stakeholders from the community, Leadership Counsel, RCD, Linguistica, Madera MLRP admin team, and others were present for the habitat installation.

The La Vina project demonstrates how successful MLRP implementation requires a carefully orchestrated approach to inclusive planning that centers landowner interests while meaningfully engaging and incorporating community input. This balance is critical when land transitions occur on private property that remains in private ownership, as is the case with most MLRP projects.

2.6.1 The Role of Neutral Facilitation

The Madera MLRP team served as a neutral facilitator between multiple stakeholders with different perspectives and interests. This facilitation role was essential because:

- **Bridging Communication Gaps**: Years of unsuccessful direct communication between the landowner and community representatives had created an impasse. The MLRP team, working through trusted intermediaries like the Farm Bureau, MAWA, and RCD, created new pathways for dialogue.
- **Managing Expectations**: The team helped all parties understand MLRP program parameters, including funding limitations, timeline constraints, and requirements for private property rights protection.
- **Translating Interests into Viable Solutions**: Community desires for walking trails and public access were carefully considered, but the team helped stakeholders understand feasibility constraints and identify alternative approaches that could meet core community needs.

2.6.2 Landowner-Centered Project Development

The La Vina project was successful because it started with landowner interests and then built in appropriate community benefits. Key elements included:

Landowner Priorities Addressed:

- Creating a buffer to reduce operational conflicts (garbage dumping, unauthorized access)
- Protecting farm workers from liability and maintenance burdens
- Receiving fair compensation for forgone agricultural returns
- Maintaining control over private property management

Community Integration Process:

- Leadership Counsel's extensive community engagement (60+ meetings since 2018) documented resident concerns about air quality, dust, and lack of recreational space.
- The MLRP team coordinated joint site visits where landowner and community representatives met for the first time to discuss the project together.
- Community input shaped specific design elements like aesthetic improvements along Avenue 9 and pollinator species selection.

2.6.3 Balancing Community Desires with Project Feasibility

The inclusive planning process required careful navigation of community expectations:

Community Wishes Expressed:

- Walking trails through the buffer zone
- Public access to the repurposed land
- Community garden space
- Enhanced recreational opportunities

MLRP Team's Role in Managing Expectations:

- Clearly communicated MLRP program limitations and private property constraints.
- Helped identify alternative solutions, such as coordination with the County's separate La Vina Mobility Project (sidewalks, street lighting, pedestrian improvements along Avenue 9).
- Facilitated understanding that meaningful air quality and aesthetic benefits could be achieved without public access.

Final Project Design Rationale:

- Prioritized benefits that could be delivered within private property constraints.
- Created substantial community benefits (100-foot buffer, pollinator habitat, visual improvements) while respecting landowner concerns about liability and maintenance.
- Coordinated timing with County mobility project to maximize pedestrian and aesthetic improvements for the community.

2.6.4 Meaningful Community Benefits Within Program Parameters

The La Vina project demonstrates how projects can provide meaningful community benefits within MLRP requirements:

Meaningful Benefits Delivered:

- **Groundwater Savings**: Reduced water use by removing established orchard.
- **Air Quality Improvement**: 100-foot vegetative buffer reduces dust and other impacts from agricultural operations.
- **Aesthetic Enhancement**: Pollinator habitat and hedgerows improve visual appeal along community frontage.
- **Community Benefits**: Created a buffer between agricultural operations for adjacent residents.

Community Engagement Requirements Met:

- Extensive documentation of community priorities through Leadership Counsel's ongoing engagement.
- Direct stakeholder participation in project design discussions.
- Community support demonstrated through participation in planting events and ongoing communication.
- Transparent process allowing community input while managing realistic expectations.

2.6.5 Coordination with Complementary Public Investments

The MLRP team's inclusive planning approach included coordination with other public investments to maximize community benefits:

- **La Vina Mobility Project**: County's separate investment in sidewalks, crosswalks, and street lighting along Avenue 9 (implementation 2027).

- **Timing Coordination**: MLRP project completion in 2025 allows habitat establishment before mobility project construction.
- **Complementary Benefits**: Private land repurposing paired with public infrastructure creates comprehensive community improvements.

2.6.6 Lessons for Inclusive Planning in MLRP

The La Vina experience offers several key insights for inclusive planning in land repurposing programs:

- **Start with Landowner Viability**: Projects must first make sense for landowners; community benefits flow from viable projects, not the reverse.
- **Use Trusted Intermediaries**: Existing relationships between landowners and local organizations (Farm Bureau, MAWA, RCD, etc.) provide essential entry points for difficult conversations.
- **Manage Expectations Early and Clearly**: Transparent communication about program constraints and private property rights prevents misunderstandings and disappointment.
- **Facilitate Direct Dialogue**: Bringing stakeholders together for the first time created breakthrough moments that years of indirect communication could not achieve.
- **Look for Complementary Solutions**: Community needs that cannot be met within MLRP parameters may be addressed through coordination with other programs and investments.
- **Document Everything**: Thorough documentation of community engagement, stakeholder input, and decision-making rationale supports both DOC approval and future replication.

The La Vina project demonstrates that meaningful benefits to disadvantaged communities can be achieved through careful, landowner-centered inclusive planning that respects private property rights while addressing genuine community needs and MLRP programmatic requirements.

Figure 3: Madera MLRP Partners, stakeholders, and community members at the La Vina Community Planting Day on March 28, 2025

In summary, the La Vina pilot project was implemented through a collaborative process involving Madera County, the MLRP team, the landowner, and local partners. It started with a landowner idea that was developed with work between the Farm Bureau, MAWA, RCD, Madera County, Leadership Counsel, Zanjero, ERA, and other program partners. The final project concept included site planning, removal of 5.27 acres of almond and walnut orchards, installation of pollinator-friendly habitat, DOC approval, and execution of a 10-year contract. Stakeholder input shaped some of the final design elements. The buffers and habitat provide local neighborhood benefits.

3. What Does the La Vina Project Cost?

The La Vina pilot project applied the incentive payment structure that is currently included in the Madera County MALRP. The Madera County MLRP team worked with the landowner to develop the project costs and total incentive payments.

Direct project costs include construction and ongoing maintenance, operations, and replacement (OM&R) cost that will continue for the duration of the 10-year project. Because the MLRP program funding is only available for a period of about 3 years, the direct project costs include up front capital, in addition to the present value of the estimated annual OM&R costs. These generally include:

- Project planning and design

- Removing established walnuts and almonds
- Any irrigation system work and reconfiguring the land for pollinator habitat
- Purchasing plants and establishing pollinator habitat
- Habitat establishment including weed barrier, bed preparation, weed management, etc.
- Ongoing limited irrigation, maintenance of the habitat area, and replanting any plants.

Direct project costs were calculated using bids provided by the landowner and its habitat plan. This included costs to purchase plants, gopher traps, and seeds. The MLRP team assisted with estimating other missing project costs, such as labor costs to plant the pollinator habitat, irrigation, and maintenance of the pollinator habitat, as well as overhead costs.

The La Vina project is in the Madera Irrigation District (MID) GSA and has access to both surface water from the district and well water. Therefore, the landowner is giving up the opportunity to continue farming the land for the 10-year duration of the contract. The foregone net farm revenue was calculated working with the landowner and the MLRP team. This includes approximately 5.27 acres of walnuts and almonds removed over the 10-year MLRP contract period. The forgone farm income payment component is the capitalized value of forgone net returns over the 10-year contract period, calculated using appropriate methods and reasonable estimates of market conditions, prices, costs, and operational returns.

A premium above direct costs and forgone farming income is a component of the Madera County MALRP payments to encourage landowner participation and pay for public co-benefits created by the project. A flat project payment of $2,000 per acre per co-benefit was applied for this pilot project. Three MALRP-defined co-benefits were identified as part of the La Vina pilot project: habitat creation by planting pollinator-friendly plants that will encourage pollinators and local ecosystems to become established, soil quality enhancement by establishing pollinator friendly native plants that support soil health, and air quality improvement by reducing dust and equipment run time near the existing community.

The total incentive payment is the sum of the direct costs, forgone income, and additional co-benefits payment components. Table 1 summarizes project payment components. The total incentive payment (cost) for the 10-year MLRP La Vina pilot contract equals $$149,920.

Table 1. La Vina Project Cost Summary

MALRP Payment Category	La Vina Pollinator Habitat
Direct Costs	$54,770
Forgone Returns	$63,550
Project Co-Benefits	$31,600
Total	$149,920

The total cost of the pilot project to the MLRP program is $149,920. Direct costs are generally reimbursed (except for the present value of the estimated OM&R costs) as they occur. Foregone

returns and project co-benefit payments are split into installments according to the landowner contract terms.

4. What is the Return on Investment of the La Vina Project?

The DOC MLRP and the Madera County MALRP are intended to encourage public co-benefits in addition to groundwater savings. The projects need to make financial sense for landowners and implementation of the project is what generates other community (public) co-benefits. Striking this balance—between sufficient incentives for private participation and delivery of public value—has been a key principle of the Madera County MALRP.

The return on investment of the La Vina pilot project—and any MLRP project—needs to consider how different benefits and costs accrue to the private landowner and the public. Cost-effectiveness is a term that is often used to characterize whether a project is a "good" investment. In the context of MLRP, cost-effectiveness of the program or any one project is complex (if not impossible) to calculate, because it must account for (monetize) multiple co-benefits beyond direct groundwater savings. That is, there is no single benefit that MLRP projects are creating against which the cost effectiveness of a project can be measured.

An initial assessment of the return on investment of the La Vina project was developed. This shows the cost per acre-foot of water savings and the cost per acre of other project co-benefits.

The La Vina project saves an estimated 150 acre-feet of groundwater pumping over the 10-year contract duration. The payment component for this water savings is the foregone return (removing trees and idling the land). The present value of this payment is $63,550. Therefore, the estimated cost per acre-foot of groundwater savings for the La Vina pilot project is approximately $423 per acre-foot of applied water. This value compares favorably to other demand reduction programs, including prices in the spot-market for water transfers that can average $400 - $600 per acre-foot, and exceed $1,200 per acre-foot in dry years, under current conditions. It is a particularly good investment when considering the voluntary nature of the program and the layered public benefits it delivers.

The La Vina project co-benefits include improved air quality from reduced dust, reduced risk of land degradation and illegal dumping, enhanced habitat and pollinator services, and local community benefits. The incentive payment components for these public benefits include the direct project costs and the additional co-benefit payment. The present value of these payments is approximately $86,370. Annualizing the payment at a reasonable social discount rate, the per acre cost for the project co-benefits is about $490 per acre per year. This value also compares favorably to a typical value of ecosystem services provided by working lands in California.

In summary, La Vina pilot project demonstrates how MLRP can deliver meaningful groundwater savings alongside a suite of public co-benefits. Traditional cost-effectiveness metrics are difficult to apply due to the diversity of the program (and individual projects) and the non-monetized

nature of many of these public benefits, but the La Vina project offers strong indicators of this value. With an estimated cost of $423 per acre-foot of groundwater savings and approximately $490 per acre per year for public co-benefits, the project compares favorably to other water demand reduction efforts and investments in ecosystem services. The pilot highlights the importance of emphasizing financial/economic viability for landowners to generate public co-benefits in addition to private returns. This reinforces the value of incentive-based approaches to groundwater sustainability and land use transition.

5. What Lessons Have We Learned?

The La Vina pilot project was driven by landowner concerns and the early work between the landowner, Farm Bureau, MAWA, RCD, and the Madera MLRP program team. It demonstrates the value of neutral third-party facilitation in bridging tensions. With this foundational work, the pilot project helped identify both opportunities and constraints that continue to shape the Madera County MALRP and broader MLRP program development. This generally included important feedback on project feasibility, incentives, costs, and value of repurposing projects that aim to balance agricultural and community needs. Importantly, this includes development time, effort, and constraints from the perspective of the landowner – the party that the entire Madera County MALRP is geared toward supporting. Taking an entire project through the contracting process also highlighted key legal issues that may come up during the contracting process and provided valuable insights into the DOC approval process.

Key takeaways from the La Vina pilot include:

- **Start with the landowner**. Projects needs to be initiated by the landowner and align with their operational interests. La Vina was initiated by the landowner in consultation with Farm Bureau and MAWA, and the project concept was then brought to the Madera MLRP team. Landowner communication and initiative is key for project success.
- **Incentive design is key**. Land repurposing needs to make financial sense for the landowner. Even for “marginal” agricultural lands in non-districted portions of critically overdrafted subbasins there is still economic value to using the land and/or its limited groundwater supplies for farming or other activities. This supports jobs for local communities. Carefully designing an economically and financially viable incentive structure and working with the landowner to understand their costs, constraints, and opportunities was a key to success for the La Vina pilot project. Madera County MALRP builds on this.
- **Neutral third-party facilitation is valuable**: The project demonstrated the importance of trusted intermediaries in connecting landowners and communities. The Farm Bureau's established relationship with the landowner provided an entry point for discussions that had previously stalled, while the MLRP team's position as a neutral third party facilitated productive dialogue between stakeholders with different perspectives. This intermediary

role was essential in transforming a history of unsuccessful communication into a collaborative project.

- **Stakeholder collaboration is important.** Early and genuine engagement between the landowner, Farm Bureau, and MAWA established the foundation, which was later expanded to include Leadership Counsel and the MLRP team, ultimately shaping a project that addressed landowner concerns while providing meaningful community benefits. The La Vina project represents the first time these stakeholders successfully came together in the same room to directly discuss their concerns and view the site together. This direct engagement transformed what had been years of unsuccessful communication attempts into a productive collaboration. The Madera MLRP administrative and partner team (Madera County, Zanjero, ERA, RCD, Farm Bureau, MAWA, Linguistica, and others) created a structured process for stakeholders to develop, implement, contract, and execute the project that balanced multiple interests.
- **Project co-benefits are an outcome of effective project design**. The La Vina project is an example of generating co-benefits through a landowner-driven project. The project first addressed landowner operational concerns about property boundaries and maintenance, defined a fair incentive structure to compensate the landowner, then incorporated elements that would provide air quality and habitat benefits. This approach of starting with landowner needs and finding alignment with community priorities resulted in multiple genuine co-benefits without compromising the project's viability.
- **Scalability**: The project demonstrates a scalable model for transitioning irrigated lands to lower water use with co-benefits. It has informed other components of the Madera MALRP.
- **Applies in groundwater dependent lands and irrigation districts**. The La Vina project is in the Madera Irrigation District GSA. This highlights the applicability of MLRP to groundwater-dependent lands and district lands that are managing groundwater under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).
- **Implementation requires flexibility**: Allowing time to adapt the project, negotiate contract terms, get buds, and then site prep, planting, and implementation should not be understated. This pilot project took over a year to implement with the full cooperation of the landowner, stakeholders, county, and Madera MLRP team.
- **Documentation**: A complete DOC approval packet takes time to develop, including all the planning and technical memorandum that go into the shorter DOC approval packed. This is essential for funding approval and the La Vina project process is serving as a model for future projects.

The key result of the La Vina pilot is that it offers a scalable example that has informed broader land repurposing in Madera County and is fully integrated into the Madera County MALRP. The Madera County MLRP team is currently reviewing several dozen MLRP project applications,

which, hopefully, demonstrates the success of the pilot and broader Madera County MALRP project design.