

Walker Basin Conservancy Guiding Principles for Transactions

August 22, 2023

Since 2014, The Walker Basin Conservancy (the Conservancy) has been involved in implementing the federally-chartered Walker Basin Restoration Program, assuming full responsibility for those efforts in 2017. Throughout the program, we have worked with more than 155 ranchers and farmers to increase streamflow in the Walker River while protecting agriculture. We have opened more than 29 miles of the Walker River to public access and acquired more than 26,000 acre-feet of water for environmental benefit.

This document serves to summarize the Conservancy's approach to water rights acquisition and protection, as it pertains to impact on the land to which the acquired water rights were appurtenant.

The Conservancy considers the following guiding principles in developing and implementing environmental water transactions:

1. Develop long-term land use plans

Prior to completing each water transaction, the Conservancy works with landowners to develop a long-term land use plan that meets the needs of the local community. This includes any activities to ensure land is not left "high and dry" by mitigating any potential weed or dust issues. Options may include restoration to drought-resistant native desert scrub plant communities, keeping land in agricultural production with other water resources, conversion to less water intensive crops (i.e., alfalfa to grazing), or other ways to keep land in agricultural production coupled with a demonstrable conservation benefit for Walker River and Walker Lake.

2. Sustain the local agricultural economy

We prioritize keeping prime agricultural land in agricultural production. When the opportunities to purchase prime agricultural land have arisen, we have worked with other producers to keep the land in the same or a higher-value crop using alternate water resources. We view this process as connecting water with the most productive land and creating a market to allow for water to be find its highest and best use.

3. Protect groundwater

The Conservancy actively works with sellers of surface water rights to ensure that any transfer will not result in increased groundwater pumping. Quite simply, we are not trying to off-set surface water use through increased groundwater use.

a. Reduce groundwater withdrawals when possible

In Nevada, the Conservancy has acquired more than 11,000 acre-feet of supplemental groundwater rights with water portfolios purchased for in-stream flows. The Conservancy has retired this water – preventing it from being pumped and directly contributing to solving groundwater table drawdowns in Mason and Smith Valleys.

b. Protect groundwater recharge

In all in-stream dedications, the Conservancy has protected the consumptive use portion of surface water rights acquired through the program. This reflects *only* the quantity of water historically respired by crops and does *not* include water lost to evaporation or groundwater recharge during conveyance.

4. Prioritize acquiring land with significant conservation value

Lands along river corridors, adjacent to public land, or with significant wildlife habitat are better candidates for native habitat re-establishment than land surrounded by other agricultural fields. The Conservancy has prioritized keeping agricultural lands in production and acquiring/restoring acreage in areas that support wildlife habitat connectivity, reduce fragmentation, and promote ecological resilience.

5. Prioritize acquiring land with recreation opportunities

In addition to prioritizing land with conservation value, we also strive to work in places that will increase recreational opportunities. We have donated over 14,000 acres of land to the State of Nevada that are now part of the Walker River State Recreation Area and the Mason Valley Wildlife Management Area. Increasing public access and supporting wildlife habitat to increase recreational use drives regional economic development and sustainability.

6. Work with willing sellers at market value

We reference federal standards for all purchase valuations and conduct regular program appraisals to ensure we are offering prices on par with those established by the local market. This facilitates a market that allows for competition, prevents speculation, supports the agricultural community, and promotes the highest and best use of resources.

7. Prevent potential conflicts with other surface water users

We conduct detailed analyses to ensure water movement or transfer from the appurtenant land results in no injury to other water users in the system. While this is an area subject to regulation of the State of California rather than the County, it is important to note that the Conservancy has a decade of experience complying with federal and state regulations to avoid injury to other users.

8. Support Tribal priorities

The Conservancy collaborates with the Walker River Paiute Tribe to administer flows through the Walker River Reservation and through to Walker Lake. Communication with the Tribe takes place on a daily basis with larger meetings occurring to review the previous irrigation season, plan for the next irrigation season, and continually refine joint tools and agreements.

9. Support local objectives with land acquisition

We work closely with local communities to identify how we can help meet their goals and objectives. We understand how important it is to include all stakeholders in the work we do so

devote considerable time and energy to communicating with people in the community. We undertake all activities in the spirit of collaboration and good faith.

10. Protect wildlife and plants

Changes in irrigation affect plants and wildlife. Before acquiring a property, the Conservancy works with landowners to develop a long-term plan that accounts for and enhances the current habitat benefits of irrigation. In our revegetation projects, we aim to include plant species that support rare and threatened species.

11. Address risk of subdivision

Land acquired by the Conservancy through NFWF funding has borne significant deed restrictions preventing subdivision and requiring long-term maintenance of the real estate for the purposes of the program: agriculture, environmental conservation, and recreation. In water-only transactions, the Conservancy actively works with landowners to ensure that long-term plans do not include or support subdivision.

12. Continue to pay water assessments and fees

We make the long-term commitment to pay water assessments and ditch fees on all NFWF-funded acquisitions even if all our water assets have been protected instream and we don't rely on the ditch infrastructure. We do not want to put undue financial burden on the U.S. Board of Water Commissioners, the Walker River Irrigation District, or individual ditches. We therefore agree to pay all assessments and fees associated with the water rights in perpetuity.