

Tule MLRP Workshop “Your Land Repurposing Priorities”

Workshop Details

- **Date:** Tuesday, April 29, 2025 | 5:00 PM – 7:00 PM
- **Location:** Conference Room, International Agri-Center, 4500 S Laspina St, Tulare, CA
- **Public Participants:** 45+
- **MLRP Partners:** 13, including representatives from Ag Innovations, Pixley Irrigation District, Tri-County GSA, Audubon California, The Nature Conservancy, Sequoia Riverlands Trust, Self-Help Enterprises, and Tulare Basin Watershed Network.
- **Total Participant Count:** 60+

Workshop Objectives

1. Build mutual awareness and appreciation of others’ concerns and priorities in the context of groundwater sustainability and land use changes in the Tule Subbasin
2. Clarify interest group priorities and land repurposing solution preferences
3. Prepare for the next Tule MLRP workshop focused on common ground and shared priorities

Agenda

- **5:00 – 5:10 PM** Welcome & Meeting Overview
- **5:10 – 5:15 PM** MLRP Planning Overview & Why It Matters
- **5:15 – 6:00 PM** Clarifying Each Other’s Interests
- **6:00 – 6:50 PM** Preferences for Repurposing Solutions and Strategies
- **6:50 – 7:00 PM** Closing & Next Steps

Workshop Materials

- Bilingual Tule MLRP Workshop Presentation “Your Land Repurposing Priorities”
- “Tule Subbasin: Your Priorities and Interests” Handouts (English and Spanish)
- Tule MLRP “Land Repurposing Solutions” Handouts (English and Spanish)

Speakers/Facilitators

- **Allison Tristao**, Resources Coordinator, Lower Tule River and Pixley Irrigation Districts
- **Abby Hart**, Project Director, The Nature Conservancy
- **Robert Gould**, Managing Facilitator, Ag Innovations
- **Nicolia Mehrling**, Lead Facilitator, Ag Innovations



Meeting Summary

Welcome & Meeting Overview

- The MLRP workshop, **“Your Land Repurposing Priorities,”** began with a brief introduction from Allison Tristao on the Groundwater Sustainability Agencies’ priorities for the Tule Subbasin. The opening remarks were delivered by Robert Gould and Nicolía Mehrling, who framed the event as the **first official multi-stakeholder workshop** for the Tule MLRP, bringing together farmers, landowners, community members, Tribal representatives, GSAs, and conservation organizations. Significant effort was made previously to ensure that growers, community members, and conservation groups were informed about SGMA implications, how MLRP could assist, and what’s required in developing multi-benefit solutions and projects.
- The workshop aimed to foster **mutual understanding** among diverse interest groups and ensure Tule MLRP partners clearly grasped stakeholder priorities. It also served as preparation for the next phase of the Tule MLRP process.
- To begin the session, participants were encouraged to connect with someone they hadn’t met before, introduce themselves, and share what they hoped to see come out of the MLRP.

MLRP Planning Overview & Why This Matters

- Abby Hart introduced the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP), a state initiative to help groundwater sustainability agencies, growers, and communities across the subbasin achieve long-term

groundwater sustainability. Each subbasin must develop a Core Plan to establish a shared vision for land repurposing and identify multi-benefit projects as part of the program.

- The Nature Conservancy and Audubon are spearheading the development of the Core Plan for the Tule Subbasin. Projects funded through MLRP aim to support groundwater sustainability while also benefiting local communities and wildlife.
- The MLRP is a voluntary, non-regulatory program that must closely align with stakeholder needs and priorities. Successful, solution-focused collaboration may pave the way for future funding and project implementation.
- An [article](#) about MLRP and this meeting was written by SJV Water journalist Lisa Mcewen.

Clarifying Each Other's Interests

- Before the discussion began, attendees were asked to review the first handout, titled "Tule Subbasin: Your Priorities and Interests". Nicolia clarified that the listed interests are not in order of priority, but are instead organized by stakeholder group. These priorities and interests were gathered from previous workshops, Advisory Committee meetings, and preparatory meetings held before this workshop. Nicolia asked attendees for feedback on the listed interests, priorities, and concerns. Attendees were encouraged to identify any missing issues and add information or details to previously identified issues.
- **Discussion Summary:** Workshop attendees confirmed that the interests and challenges were accurate. They emphasized the importance of economic development and viability as foundational for both growers and communities, as the agricultural economy is impacted. Multiple attendees also agree that quality drinking water is a priority across the subbasin. Some attendees remain unclear on the basic mechanisms of MLRP; program partners addressed those questions.

Questions & Answers

The following are questions and comments from attendees, with responses from MLRP partners.

- *Question from participant:* Where is MLRP funding coming from? Usually, there is very little funding for land-fallowing efforts. What are some ways the land fallowing can get funding, either through MLRP or otherwise?
 - A: Funding for MLRP comes from the Department of Conservation. Each block grant receives \$10M. In the Tule Subbasin, half of the funding is for planning, partner capacity, and outreach, and the other half is for projects. Some of the funding has already been allocated to projects.
 - A: The MLRP grant is not only for land fallowing but can include land fallowing projects. The District has a fallowing program and is currently looking for additional funds to continue the program.
- *Question from participant:* This is a very rich planning process considering the need to address so many needs and interests. Will there be a plan, and will it be published?
 - A: Yes, MLRP partners are finalizing the first draft of the Tule Subbasin Regional Core Plan. The draft will be ready for review by stakeholders and for public comment within the next few months before it is finalized. It will need to be fully approved by the Department of Conservation. Feedback gathered during workshops will be integrated into the Core Plan. This document is not enforceable and it will be used by the GSAs and other organizations to apply for additional funding.
- *Comment from participant:* Farmers have invested greatly in their lands over the years and are now asked to retire them, which is putting their livelihoods in peril, with few viable options. For example,

solar projects are only feasible for farmers in certain areas, where there is the right electric utility infrastructure (e.g., transmission lines) and often take years from project to be developed and approved.

- *Question from participant:* Is there an online tool for farmers to add their property address and learn if their land is feasible for groundwater recharge?
 - A: UC Merced is developing a GIS-based called Shiny Toolkit to assess land suitability for projects. Still, due to technical and confidentiality issues, it cannot help assess land suitability at the parcel/farm level due to limited resolution.
- *Comment from participant:* It might help to develop a chart showing compatibility between different solutions, like recharge basins and habitat, for example. Fish & Wildlife is working with private landowners on habitat for endangered species; there are many collaborative opportunities.
 - A: This will be one of the topics for the Tule MLRP workshop in June.
- *Question from participant:* Some communities listed in the document do not have any input. What is the strategy moving forward to ensure the priorities of these communities are captured?
 - A: It has been challenging to engage certain communities in the region due to the lack of community organizing efforts. MLRP partners will look into other ways to reach some of these communities.
- *Comment from participant:* As community residents, we are interested in high-quality, clean, and safe water. We are also interested in land repurposing and MLRP; we believe that healthy lands result in clean, healthy water. We are very interested in working together with farmers and landowners and learning how we can help.
- *Comment from participant:* Clean drinking water is a great baseline; it is the one thing we can all agree on.
- *Question from participant:* Is there any funding going into habitat restoration efforts, such as the Pixley Wildlife Refuge?
 - A: Yes, transitioning land into habitat is one of the repurposing options this project seeks to fund. The [Capinero Creek project](#), a former 500-acre dairy along Deer Creek, is one such example. Additional funding for future habitat projects, which often require substantial funding to acquire land, will be guided by the MLRP Core Plan under development and ongoing efforts to attract and win funding for compelling multi-benefit projects.
- *Comment from participant:* We are from Tipton and farm almonds. I am a farmer and a community member. We prioritize water around communities when there is minimal surface water supply, and farmers shut off water from their lands to elevate the water table around those areas. I can relate to the community concerns being shared – my kids drink the same water and breathe the same air – we are part of the community. As farmers and community members, we should all pull in the same direction. By the time high food costs hit the community, farmers will be out of business.
- *Comment from participant:* In Allensworth, we seek ways to access land. Our community is surrounded by a 5,000-acre farm owned by John Hancock Insurance (a subsidiary called Manu Life), which is up for sale. How can we return to land stewardship and use fewer pesticides and herbicides that pollute our land and water?

- *Comment from participant:* Flood risk mitigation should also be included as part of stormwater/floodwater capture as one of the community's priorities.
- *Comment from participant:* Giving people access to drinking water is not the same as giving them access to a well. It is not the same quality of life if you can't pump water from the ground yourself (in your home) and are forced to bring in water from outside (off the property, via water jugs).
- *Comment from participant:* Communities impacted by all the issues we've discussed also lack economic development opportunities. Jobs are going away. We have a chance to create an economic engine so that residents can access essential services. If land is being repurposed and fallowed, how can we create job opportunities and increase residents' quality of life?
- *Comment from participant:* Tule River Tribe is concerned about water rights and access, with a significant interest in securing water rights for domestic, agricultural, ecological, and economic development opportunities. Tribe has land above and within the basin, 75K acres approx. Interested in both surface and groundwater, and cultural resources protection. There are sacred sites from south of Stockton to the Bakersfield area. Additional interests: habitat and ecosystem health, fisheries, native plants & wildlife, land use and stewardship - including sustainable land management practices on and off Tribal land that includes collaborative efforts, agricultural forestry, and grazing.
- *Comment from participant:* Wildlife protected areas are isolated, which limits wildlife movement (and the ability to find food, reproduce, and escape floods). We need to use science and local knowledge to identify corridors and connectivity.
 - A: Working lands in agriculture can also provide habitat. MLRP can provide opportunities to try different farming practices that can benefit wildlife. Land transition doesn't always mean land has to come out of production entirely.
- *Comment from participant:* Healthy soils are very important. Some landowners are practicing regenerative agriculture that reduces chemicals and fertilizers. A diversity of species is needed to have healthy ecosystems. Healthy soils are the first step for healthy drinking water; without healthy soil, no proper filtration. We need to create balance through MLRP projects. The lack of ag jobs will hurt community members, perhaps more than landowners, and we need to keep the more productive land in production. Farmers tend to use pesticides and herbicides sparingly as they are very costly. Most landowners are putting money into community projects through school bonds, etc. As land value goes down, these projects become less viable. We need to partner as a community and landowners to remove unproductive farmland and protect the most sustainable, vital, productive farmland.
- *Comment from MLRP partner:* I'm struggling with the word "idle lands" or taking lands out of production. There is nothing idle in a nature preserve—there is a lot of activity. It's important to think creatively around diversification and multi-benefit.
- *Comment from participant:* We would like people to also think about the farmworkers who are migrating to other places due to a lack of work in the area. We would also like to see an increase in Tribal access to cultural and medicinal resources.



Preferences for Repurposing Solutions & Strategies

Ag Innovations staff introduced the next agenda item, which focused on land repurposing solutions and strategies. They explained that some growers are considering different strategic approaches. These include reducing the amount of farmed land and consolidating water rights to fewer acres or purchasing additional fallowed acres and consolidating the water allocation from those acres. Robert Gould then reviewed the land repurposing strategies (see PowerPoint and the “Land Repurposing Solutions” handout under the [Meeting Materials](#) section).

Robert clarified that partners are looking for high-level answers from participants on the following questions:

1. *What solutions and strategies will most likely meet your top interest and why?*
2. *How could this solution be implemented in a way that might meet other interests, too?*

Discussion Summary: Attendees expressed doubts about the financial viability of solar and land fallowing, and concern that recharge basins will not create substantive benefits for habitat or drinking water. Participants expressed appreciation for each other and agreed that a pilot project that could be scaled and replicated throughout the area would be valuable.

Question to landowners/growers

- *Comment from participant:* We had considered a community solar project in the past– where the community can participate in a solar program, to lower their electricity bills–but the state closed that program in early 2024, yet may have [new plans](#) to open it again.
 - **Note:** a “community solar project” is a particular kind of solar project that was allowed and piloted in CA for several years, where community members could invest in the project and receive the benefit of lower-cost, locally produced clean energy from a solar farm. It typically required about 20 -75 acres of land to provide ample energy to a community.

What has remained available to landowners is the development of even larger, “utility-scale solar projects” where a farmer leases land to a solar development company for at least 20 years to engineer, build, interconnect, and maintain a very large solar project. Those projects typically require 100 - 1,000 acres of land, sometimes more. However, projects can take years to develop and get approved by the CPUC and County Planning departments. The Williamson Act can also delay or prevent it unless County governments work proactively to allow for utility-scale solar as a viable farm use. [Guidance](#) from the Department of Conservation.

- *Comment from participant:* Allensworth is looking at agrivoltaics, elevated solar arrays that allow native plants or irrigated crops to grow under them, which can support habitat restoration, food sovereignty, and power the community. It is important not to scrape or entirely clear land when installing large-scale solar farms—we can do solar, maintain habitat, and grow food simultaneously.
- *Comment from participant:* Was part of a land-fallowing program for 2 years. The cover crop was 3ft high after 1 year, but less than 1ft tall after year 2. Once you take out the fertilizer from the soil, salt comes back and inhibits growth. Doubtful that land fallowing is going to work (in many places). How will grazing work if we get \$10/acre, and our property takes \$50/acre? Sixty-eight thousand acres in the Tule Subbasin are going out of production. Is conservation going to create jobs? Some communities are over 50% farmworkers—those communities will disappear.
- *Comment from participant:* Eco-tourism offers economic opportunities. People pay a lot for activities such as birding, which can also generate income for lodging, restaurants, etc. It's not a straightforward process, but there are ways that conservation and wildlife can bring in economic opportunities.
- *Question from participant:* There is much conflicting information on best practices for recharge basins. Are there any solid studies on shaded recharge basins and how long they might hold water?
- *Question from participant:* Can the MLRP program fund fencing for grazing? Fencing is prohibitively costly.
 - A: Yes, it can cover costs if you're transitioning ag land out of production. Additional funding could also come from other sources, like NRCS. Alternatively, Tri-County GSA will be piloting a “virtual fence” cattle management [technology](#) to save money.

Question to community members

- *Comment from participant:* Many community members have issues with tap water—often, the power goes off, and they cannot shower or use water. Family members have to take extra safety measures before they can interact with their kids after working in the field. We need to adopt nature-based practices. We have high rates of cancer because of the chemicals used in farming and the water.
- *Comment from participant:* Allensworth is a food desert. We are not anti-agriculture—just against venture capitalists; their families are not suffering the consequences. Some farmers have lived on their lands for generations, and farmers who are extractive—we need to make a very clear distinction between those.
- *Comment from participant:* For us, jobs and housing are the most important things. Having medical clinics may also be part of the solution.

- *Comment from participant:* Large corporate farms are buying us out. We are also part of the community and have people who have worked for us for over 50 years. Big farms do not care about these communities.
- *Comment from participant:* What locations are most suitable for a project that could be replicated in other areas? A lot of these communities are very similar. Necessary to develop a process that works very well and follow that example.



Question to conservation groups

- *Comment from participant:* A recharge basin is a poor excuse for habitat (if it is not a “multi-benefit” recharge basin that allows for habitat). Rivers have a higher potential for recharge. There are many benefits to bringing rivers back: wildlife corridors, habitat restoration, and connecting to floodplains. A huge benefit is that river restoration can be part of MLRP. The recharge basin has no connectivity at all. Is there anything keeping river and floodplain restoration from being a high priority?
 - A: One of the MLRP projects considered for funding is a study of floodplains and where they could be most suitable in the Subbasin. MLRP is focused on repurposing land; river restoration would distract from land repurposing efforts.
- *Comment from MLRP partner:* Dos Rios State Park is a good example of a multi-benefit floodplain restoration project. River Partners purchased land and continued farming while raising funds for restoration. It is now in the restoration phase in partnership with State Parks. The surprising benefit was the job creation: They could continue employing those who were working those lands and also created additional jobs.
- *Question from participant:* Who decides how MLRP funds are distributed across projects?
 - A: Applicants submitted through MLRP with scoring criteria based on water savings. None of the initial project applications offered direct benefits to the community, so applications were revised to ensure clear community benefits. Some funds are still available for a community-based or other multi-benefit project.

Closing & Next Steps

- Robert Gould clarified that additional funds will come from the state to MLRP and that the Tule Subbasin will compete with other subbasins for this funding.
- Nicolia Mehrling encouraged three participants who had not yet shared to share their thoughts.
 - *Resident from Allensworth:* We live next to a huge pistachio farm owned by Manulife. Being close to a farm owned by big farm businesses who do not seem to care made me believe that all farmers are like this. The conversations from today changed my perspective after being in the room with farmers who are also part of the community. My takeaway is that farmers really care, and we are all in this together.
 - *Resident from Earlimart:* I am very happy to be here sharing ideas with farmers and understanding each other's needs and priorities. Now I understand that farmers are trying their best with their land. I'm sad that a lot of dairy farmers, vineyards, and almond orchards are going out of production. I would like to see other farmers and landowners in meetings so we can continue to learn from each other.
 - *MLRP partner:* There is hope that we can all work together to find opportunities and solutions. It is great to hear that community residents are excited to be part of these conversations.

MLRP partners closed the workshop by thanking participants and providing details about the next Tule MLRP workshop, scheduled for June 10th from 4:00 PM to 7:00 PM. This session will focus on exploring shared priorities in greater depth and discussing how solutions can be implemented.