MLRP TULE SUBBASIN | Multi-Benefit Land Repurposing Program

# Tule Subbasin MLRP Workshop

## "Finding Common Ground and Shared Priorities on Land Repurposing"

## Workshop Details

- **Date**: Tuesday, June 10, 2025 | 4:00 PM – 7:00 PM
- **Location**: Conference Room, International Agri-Center, 4500 S Laspina St, Tulare, CA
- **Public Participants**: 40+
- **MLRP Partners**: 12, including representatives from Pixley Irrigation District GSA, Tri-County Water Authority GSA, Audubon California, Sequoia Riverlands Trust, Tule Basin Land and Water Conservation Trust, Self-Help Enterprises, and Ag Innovations.
- **Total Participant Count**: 50+

## Workshop Objectives

1. Alignment and input on shared priorities for land repurposing in the Tule Subbasin.
2. A set of top land repurposing solutions with strong interest and potential, along with key needs and questions for implementation.
3. A clearer picture of the most practical solutions, including their pros and cons.
4. Input on how realistic and beneficial the proposed solutions are.
5. Understanding of the Core Plan: how it connects to future funding and is shaped by workshop input.

## Agenda

- **4:00 – 5:15 PM** Welcome & Meeting Overview
- **4:15 – 4:45 PM** Shared Priorities: Finding Common Ground
- **4:45 – 5:15 PM** Examples of the Top Land Repurposing Solutions/Tools
- **5:15 – 6:20 PM** Highest Potential Land Repurposing Solutions & Strategies
- **6:20 – 6:35 PM** Closing & Next Steps
- **6:35 – 7:00 PM** Time for Questions & Conversation

## Workshop Materials

- Bilingual Tule MLRP Workshop Presentation "Finding Common Ground and Shared Priorities on Land Repurposing"
- "Top Land Repurposing Options" Handout (English and Spanish)

## Speakers/Facilitators

- **Robert Gould**, Managing Facilitator, Ag Innovations
- **Nicolia Mehrling**, Lead Facilitator, Ag Innovations
- **Allison Tristao**, Resources Coordinator, Lower Tule River and Pixley Irrigation Districts
- **Deanna Jackson**, Executive Director, Tri-County Water Authority GSA
- **Kathy McLaughlin**, Interim Director, Tule Basin Land and Water Conservation Trust
- **Logan Huecker**, Executive Director, Sequoia Riverlands Trust
- **Emily Boettger**, Land Protection Outreach Specialist, Sequoia Riverlands Trust
- **Jessica Parrish**, Environmental Planner, CA Department of Conservation

## Workshop Highlights

- Participants reviewed the Tule Subbasin Regional Priorities, developed from previous workshops and advisory committee meetings, and expressed broad alignment with them. These stakeholder priorities will help guide future land repurposing efforts to achieve the most significant benefits and inform the development of the Tule Subbasin Regional Core Plan (Core Plan). The Core Plan will also serve as a key tool in advocating for additional funding for the region.

- In breakout groups, attendees discussed various land repurposing solutions and identified those they viewed as most feasible and capable of delivering multiple community and environmental benefits. Groundwater recharge and habitat restoration received the strongest support; participants expressed skepticism about solar farms unless they incorporate multi-benefit aspects.

- Participants highlighted some key information and data gaps, such as the need for more robust and accessible science data on cover cropping and agrivoltaics.

- Participants highlighted the importance of ongoing education and engagement efforts, especially for youth and marginalized communities. They also stressed the need to build and sustain trust among diverse stakeholders, including community residents and landowners or growers, for successful collaboration. Participants appreciated the MLRP multi-stakeholder workshops and acknowledged the growing need for such forums.


*Participants discuss land repurposing solutions in small breakout groups. | Tule Subbasin MLRP Workshop | June 10, 2025*

# Meeting Summary

## Welcome & Meeting Overview

- The **Tule Subbasin MLRP workshop, "Finding Common Ground and Shared Priorities on Land Repurposing,"** began with brief introductions from Allison Tristao and Jessica Parrish of the California Department of Conservation (DOC), the state agency funding the Multi-Benefit Land Repurposing Program. Nicolia Mehrling then reviewed the outcomes of the April 29 Tule MLRP workshop, in which stakeholder groups discussed their respective interests and identified possible overlap. Nicolia then introduced the workshop's goals – to build alignment around shared subbasin priorities and identify high-potential land repurposing options.
    - This was the second multi-stakeholder workshop of the Tule Subbasin MLRP and brought together landowners, farmers, community members, water agencies, NGOs, and conservation organizations.
    - Nicolia reviewed the workshop objectives and agenda, and explained the three waves of project applications for the Tule MLRP:
        - The first wave included projects pre-identified during the grant application process.
        - The second wave includes applications that have been submitted and are still in the design phase; these will be sent to DOC for approval.
        - The third wave will be informed by the Tule Subbasin Regional Core Plan (Core Plan).
- The Core Plan will serve as a guide that draws on advisory meetings and workshops to inform future land repurposing efforts and increase the likelihood of securing future funding. It is not regulatory or mandatory, but rather an effort to increase effective collaboration and provide information on viable options. The Core Plan will also address Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) and State priorities (*see Slide 7*), including:
    - Significant reduction in water demand
    - Mitigation of land subsidence
    - Access to clean, affordable drinking water (groundwater) for communities
    - Supporting farmers to continue farming viable land
- Ag Innovations staff clarified the use of terms within the MLRP framework: "solutions" refer to options for shifting land toward less water-intensive uses, while "strategies" refer to implementation approaches. It was acknowledged that these will not fully address all subbasin challenges, but can ease the transition towards sustainable groundwater use.

## Shared Priorities: Finding Common Ground

**Discussion summary:** Approximately three-quarters of participants expressed alignment with the Regional Priorities, although some raised concerns about the feasibility of addressing subbasin-wide air quality under the MLRP. Participants requested that the priorities reference contextual information, such as the regulatory landscape, SGMA undesirable results, and changing weather patterns, to support a more holistic understanding of land use change. Participants also emphasized the importance of expanding educational opportunities for youth and prioritizing support for disadvantaged communities, calling for stronger use of scientific data and science-based education related to land repurposing. They suggested creating a tool to clarify the types of projects that fall within the scope of the MLRP.

- Robert Gould emphasized that the MLRP operates within the context of GSA and State priorities. He reviewed a draft list of Tule Subbasin regional priorities based on prior advisory meetings and workshops. While some previously expressed interests were not explicitly listed, they will still be

captured in the Core Plan. With the goal of finding common ground across different stakeholder groups, these priorities should address the question: *What benefits the subbasin overall?*

- **Tule Subbasin Regional Priorities** (not in order of importance):
    1. **Keep farmers farming and farm employees working**
    2. **Encourage economic sustainability and diversification**
    3. **Address subsidence and flooding**
    4. **Improve access to clean, affordable water for domestic uses**
    5. **Create access to land: open space and community-oriented farming**
    6. **Improve air quality**
    7. **Foster valuable habitat and ecosystem functions**

*The following are questions, comments, and feedback from attendees, with responses from MLRP partners (paraphrased for clarity)*.

- *Question from participant*: Are there any identified areas where there is a higher risk of subsidence and flooding?
    - *Response from MLRP partner*: There are maps that identify high-risk areas.
    - *Answer from farmer*: We are trying to direct floodwater into the areas of subsidence where it can have the most benefit.

- *Question from participant:* How does priority number 5 look in practice? Are there any examples?
    - A: E.g., Open spaces acting as buffer zones for communities, habitat spaces and recharge basins with wildlife components and walkable trails.

- *Question from participant*: Is Valley Fever caused by drought-related dust?
    - A: Yes. It can also result from farm machinery or when trees are shaken during harvest.

- *Question from participant*: A significant amount of water is wasted in Visalia due to irrigation on private lawns and gardens. Is there anything that can be done about this?
    - A: This issue is out of the scope of the MLRP program but we recommend contacting your local county or city to address this issue.
    - A: The Core Plan will include broader concerns that may be addressed through other funding sources.

- *Comment from participant*: A tool showing what falls within or outside MLRP scope would be helpful.

- *Comment from participant:* Combine priorities 5 (*Create access to land: open space and community-oriented farming)* and 7 *(Foster valuable habitat and ecosystem functions).*

- *Comment from participant:* Frame these priorities and solutions within the context of climate change–we've been dealing with these issues long before climate change but they are now being exacerbated due to the impact of climate change.

- *Comment from participant:* Explicitly include groundwater recharge as a priority.

- *Comment from participant:* Acknowledge policies that have impacted the way surface water has been wasted or its uses restricted for other beneficial uses.

- *Comment from participant*: MLRP should take a more active role in researching the scientific data on land subsidence. In some cases, subsidence is occurring 7-10 miles away from where overdrafting is happening. We need to understand better who is responsible for the subsidence and follow the

science. i.e., There are some farmers who are not overdrafting groundwater, but their land is still subsiding.

- *Comment from participant*: I agree with what the farmers are sharing, and I also want to emphasize that those who are usually impacted the most are the disadvantaged communities, the places with the most need. I would like to see a bigger focus on those who have been historically most impacted by issues like flooding, etc.

- *Question from participant*: There have been mixed results with cover crops for farmers. Is there anywhere we can find any hard data/maps to prove and quantify the benefits of cover cropping, e.g., x amount of cover crops in summer months can save x amount of water?

- *Comment from participant*: Make priority number 3 more broad to also address "undesirable results" (e.g., reductions in groundwater storage, degradation of water quality, well depth, etc.) under SGMA, as well as both farmers' and community needs?

- *Comment from participant*: Is all this information available to the public? Is there any way we can have younger generations in the room and provide more educational opportunities for youth?
    - A: Allensworth Progressive Association (APA), in collaboration with Socio-Environmental & Education Network (SEEN) has organized workshops, summer programs and hands-on educational opportunities for high school students.

- Robert Gould then conducted a "thumbs up/sideways/down" poll to assess alignment around priorities:
    - **Thumbs up:** About ¾ of the room.
    - **Thumbs sideways:** Concern about the feasibility of addressing Priorities #5 and #6 due to their scale; participants doubt whether MLRP is the appropriate tool for addressing these priorities

*Additional feedback, comments, and questions shared in writing by participants via note cards (verbatim):*

- Getting more water to the communities through the State
- Adding soil health as a priority for our subbasin is a great idea
- Add soil health to the priorities
- "*Employees* on farms have jobs." – not "farmworkers"
- Priority #7 should include habitat connectivity in the most crucial areas. The logistics to support this will help #2. Without habitat connectivity, the impact of #7 will be reduced
- Need to meet with the farmers to talk to community members one-on-one
- Drinking water kiosks in Poplar, Earlimart, Teviston, Tipton, Woodville
- Where can we find maps regarding priority #3? *(Translated)*
- Regarding priority #4,are there any regulations or controls in place to prevent animal waste from ranches from contaminating water used for domestic purposes, in order to avoid E. coli and other diseases? *(Translated)*
- Recycle ocean water as a solution to use it in agriculture and other needs *(Translated)*
- How can the community participate in projects trying to address air quality? It would be great to have a workshop on how to improve air quality *(Translated)*
- Combining #5 and #7 isn't a good idea – farmers can't give full access to their property
- Community access could be in the form of field trips.
- Use science and data regardless of where the results of studies may lead. Define or quantify terms such as "beneficial" or "viable."
- State that, including Tribal input & co-management, cultural gatherings, is important
- How much $ is available to help with these conversions? Multi-benefit repurposing takes water from somewhere – how do you balance? Must generate enough $ to pay taxes.

## The Top 5 Land Repurposing Solutions/Tools

- MLRP Partners presented on the alternative land uses that have been of most interest, including project examples for each alternative land use from Tule or nearby subbasins. Participants received handouts detailing these top five land repurposing solutions/tools. Top five land repurposing tools:

    1. **Temporary fallowing** (*slides 12-13*)
        - Example: Tule Land Trust Fallowing Program
        - Land fallowing can be multi-benefit
            - Turning irrigation wells off near communities can help water in community wells stay at a higher level
            - Landowners benefit due to water allocations
                - They are also being compensated for taking land out of production
                - Also helps with property taxes

    2. **Habitat** (*slides 16-17*)
        - Example: Capinero Creek Restoration Project
            - Former 467 acre dairy converted into habitat
            - Alpaugh High School students participated in a science project at Capinero Creek and won 2nd place at the California Science and Engineering Fair

    3. **Multi-benefit recharge** (*slides 14-15*)
        - Example: “Flying Dragon Ranch”
            - Property purchased by East Kaweah GSA
                - Citrus orchard taken out of production, fallowed land converted into recharge basin
                - Planting at the highest point of the property; seeds will travel down during rainy season and plant themselves throughout

    4. **Multi-use open space** (*slides 18-19*)
        - Example: “La Vina” Pilot Project (Madera MLRP)
            - Landowner-initiated project; created buffer zone with pollinator habitat and hedge rows to reduce dust and pesticide use
            - Huge amount of collaboration (Self-Help, Farm Bureau, design team that included community members)
            - 10-year contract through easement
            - Ag land is still in production while creating solutions that benefit communities
                - There will be public access to a nearby grocery store through a walkable path which is to be funded through matching funds from the County

    5. **Multi-benefit solar farm**
        - Example: “Westlands Solar Park”
            - GSA has decided to use MLRP approach to enable more of this scale operation
            - Feeds into massive power plants (it powers 750,000 homes)
            - Smaller-scale projects are also possible (“community solar”)
            - Large-scale usually involves large solar companies
        - *Question from participant*: Where can you find a consulting firm to start a project?
            - A: Contacting a solar development company would be the best place to start.
        - *Question from participant*: What happens to solar panels once the lease is over?

        - A: The solar company and landowner can potentially continue the lease. If panels are obsolete, the company is obligated to dispose of and replace them.
    - *Comment from participant:* There is not much multi-benefit to a solar farm. The focus should be on agrivoltaics–there are ways to use solar panels and farm at the same time, and include habitat.
        - A: A potential social benefit of a solar farm is the creation of local jobs and economic opportunities. Some of that power can also be sold to the community.

+ *Strategies* (*slide 24*)
    1. Focus on one solution
    2. Combine solutions
    3. Reduce ag land use + consolidate water allocations
    4. Increase fallowed land + consolidate water allocations
    5. Use various conservation structures (easements, covenants, contracts)
    6. Use different fallowing timelines (annual, 10 year, permanent)

## Highest Potential Land Repurposing Solutions & Strategies

**Activity summary**: In small groups, participants discussed the benefits and limitations of potential land repurposing solutions. They debated implementation approaches and voted on the solutions most suited to the Tule Subbasin. All three groups identified groundwater recharge and habitat restoration as the most promising options.

- Attendees split into three breakout groups, each designed to include a mix of stakeholders representing diverse interests and priorities. Each group discussed the following questions:
    1. **Which land repurposing solutions/tools are you or others most interested in and why?**
    2. **Which are the best fit for your area and create the most benefits?**
    3. **Which solutions do you want the GSA's to pursue?**

- **Discussion themes**: Growers are open to any solutions that are economically viable. All participants acknowledged that viability will depend to some extent on programmatic funding, although this funding could be generated from diverse sources. Making connections is the key to successful multi-benefit projects, whether this is habitat connectivity in restoration projects, connecting communities with adjacent landowners, or promoting education. Throughout the breakout groups, participants raised adjacent topics that need to be addressed alongside land repurposing, such as surface water management and arsenic remediation.

- Below are the preferred solutions shared by each group during the breakout groups:
    - Group 1
        - Multi-benefit recharge
        - Habitat (rewilding land + grazing, including pollinators/birds…if viable)
        - Clean water solutions (address contamination issues around communities/drinking water)
        - "Whatever fallowing solutions works" (economically feasible solutions)
        - Cleaner air solutions
    - Group 2
        - Multi-benefit recharge – 9 votes
        - Habitat – 7 votes
        - Fallowing – 3 votes
        - Open space – 3 votes
        - Solar – 1 vote

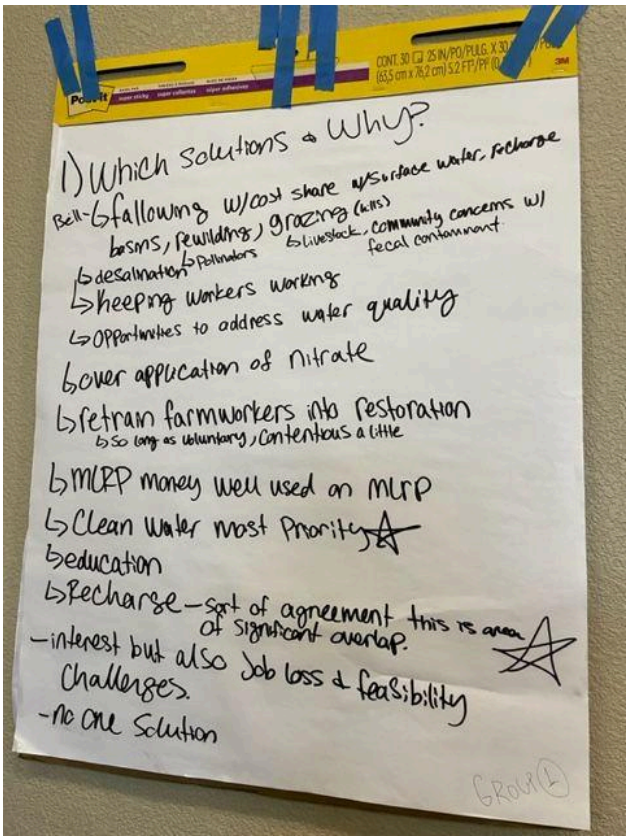
            - Note that solar may have more support if it could be multi-benefit and integrated with community food security
    - Group 3
        - Multi-benefit recharge – 10 votes
        - Fallowing – 10 votes
        - Habitat – 10 votes
        - Open space – 6 votes
        - Solar – 1 vote

- Key takeaways from the breakout group discussions:
    - The biggest concern is around farms not remaining viable with loss of farms, economic losses generally and job losses
    - Most promise seems to be in multi-benefit recharge, but open to anything that'll be economically viable if funded in some way (e.g., grazing, habitat); concerns and lack of enthusiasm for growers that can/will stay in business
    - Big grey area–is not going to be one solution –multiple solutions, multiple strategies
    - Connectivity in habitat and restoration projects is key
    - Education is key to overcoming trust barriers and building support
        - Need more education for youth and the community at large (education on how groundwater is managed could make conversations a lot more productive)
    - Surface water is an important conversation to have alongside groundwater because of how much they interact.
    - Need solutions for flood-prone areas
    - There is support for agri-voltaics over standalone solar, and skepticism around solar being viable
    - Solutions that require GSA involvement and leadership for it to happen
        - Open space for community
        - Riparian corridors with community involvement
    - There was discussion on solutions for arsenic remediation (APA) and how these fit into MLRP

*Participants discuss land repurposing solutions in small breakout groups. | Tule Subbasin MLRP Workshop | June 10, 2025*

Below are notes from each group discussion, transcribed from flipcharts.

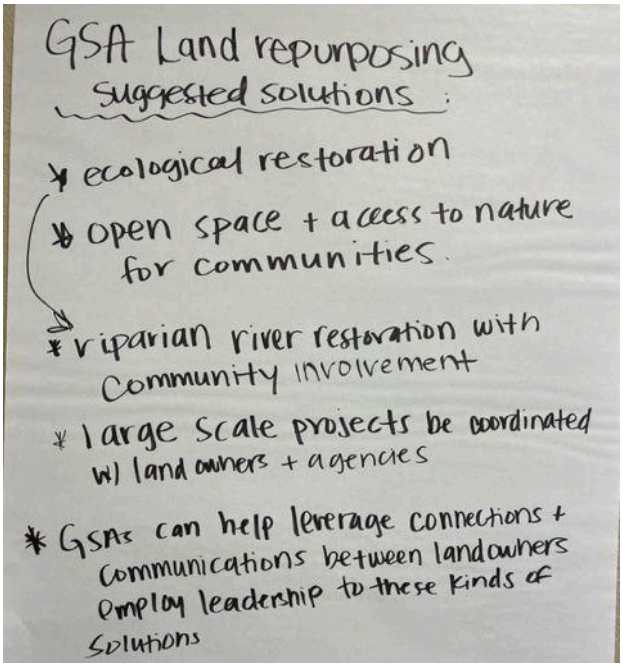
- Group 1
    - Land fallowing with cost share for multi-benefit elements. More specifically,
      recharge basins, re-wilding ag land (strong pollinator focus), grazing (though not profitable w/o incentives)
        - some community concerns with fecal contaminants from manure around dairies and possibly grazing if too concentrated. While dairies are regulated for water quality concerns remain. To what degree are they warranted?.
    - Possibility of desalination of seawater, like on the coast?
    - Keep workers working, especially with crops that are more labor intensive
    - There may be opportunities to address water quality
    - Growers & community members see concerns with over-application of nitrates contaminating groundwater or going airborne (water & air quality)
    - Job training for farmworkers to learn restoration techniques that could provide some jobs in the future; what other job retraining will be needed?
    - Clean water (perhaps the highest priority, after keeping farms and jobs alive)
    - Education




- Group 2
    - Prioritize contiguous/adjacent projects to support corridors and access, etc. (including corridors of open space, habitat, and riparian ecosystems), and prioritize projects near communities
        - Example: a grower converted the portion of his land closest to residences to solar panels, with the hope that his decreased pumping in that area would protect their wells/water supply
    - Place fallowing near communities
    - Farmers could partner with communities (i.e.: Allensworth) that can access private funding for projects; this way, relatively limited government funding can be leveraged into larger projects
    - Agrivoltaics are of high interest
        - People connected to SEEN have done a lot of research and have a similar framework to MLRP
    - Connectivity should be the focus for habitat and ecosystem services projects
        - Continuous water flow could act as a buffer for contaminants in the aquifer
    - Need to promote projects that encourage people to grow their own food
    - Education of young people should be a priority; more opportunities to get involved
    - Lack of trust between landowners/farmers and communities seems to be the biggest barrier to projects

*Participants discuss land repurposing solutions in small breakout groups. | Tule Subbasin MLRP Workshop | June 10, 2025*

- <u>Group 3</u>
    - Ecological restoration
        - Riparian river restoration with community involvement
    - Open space + access to nature for communities
    - Large scale projects coordinated with landowners and agencies
    - GSAs can help leverage connections between landowners / employ leadership for these solutions
    - Agrivoltaics
        - Make it an economic opportunity; include habitat and grazing
    - Solar on its own is not a great tool
    - More drinking water solutions
    - Build a water kiosk on an MLRP project



## Closing & Next Steps

- MLRP partners shared that feedback from this and previous workshops will shape the Core Plan, which will be open for public comment after the first draft is finalized. They are working with GSAs to set targets for the Tule Subbasin.
- Attendees were encouraged to reach out to Allison Tristao for questions about MLRP projects.
- MLRP partners thanked attendees and expressed interest in follow-up conversations with those engaged in the process.
- Attendees were invited to stay after the workshop for informal discussions and additional Q&A.