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**Carrying A Torch For Rare Desert Fish**

FEBRUARY 5, 2018 – BISHOP, CA – Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT) has reached a crucial step to restore important wildlife habitat at the ponds on Benton Hot Springs Ranch. This success story was possible through a partnership with private landowner Bill Bramlette, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and CalFire. After three years of careful planning, the recently executed prescribed burn will eradicate aggressive plant species and create sustainable habitat for a rare desert fish, the Owens speckled dace.

The spring-fed ponds at Benton Hot Springs Ranch were historically documented to contain the Owens speckled dace – a fish whose ancestors swam in the prehistoric Mono Lake. Over the past 80 years, this rare desert fish has been in steep decline throughout the Owens Basin due to habitat modifications and encroachment by non-native fish.

“This is an opportunity to safeguard a declining species by putting it back in its natural habitat after an absence of perhaps 80 years,” reflected Steve Parmenter, lead CDFW Biologist on the Benton Ponds restoration project. “And as an ancillary benefit, the ponds will become indefinitely sustainable for all wildlife, whereas without this intervention they were rapidly turning into a bog.”

The Benton ponds are located on private property owned by fourth-generation rancher Bill Bramlette, who partnered with ESLT in 2008 to voluntarily preserve the ponds and surrounding meadows with a conservation easement designed to permanently protect the wildlife habitat and prohibit future development.

"I saw an opportunity to do meaningful conservation by working with partners who had access to resources and experts," Bramlette commented. "Throughout the challenges we faced, I was constantly amazed by and appreciative of the perseverance and dedication of ESLT, California Fish & Wildlife, and CalFire."

The process of reintroducing a vulnerable species such as the speckled dace is no simple task. Long before the fish arrive, the ponds and their surrounding vegetation must be meticulously restored by removing two aggressive plants: hardstem bulrush and cattails. If left unchecked, these species would eventually choke out all viable fish habitat on the water.

In 2013, ESLT and CDFW turned to CalFire for assistance in planning and carrying out a prescribed burn at the Benton ponds to remove the aggressive vegetation.

Henry Herrera, Unit Forester of Calfire, commented that, "It was a great experience to partner with many cooperators to improve wildlife habitat and control non-native plant species through the use of prescribed fire. We utilized the safest measure and best available science-based environmental parameters to implement this prescribed fire.

CalFire hopes to collaborate with many cooperators in the Eastern Sierra to utilize more of this valuable tool for species control, habitat improvement, range improvement, and to reduce the fire risk."

For three years, weather conditions prevented the prescribed burn at the Benton ponds from being executed safely and effectively. In the meantime, ESLT volunteers, led by volunteer Board Member Tim Bartley, manually removed the invasive plants and transplanted three-square bulrush, a more suitable native species that will help improve pond habitat.

In December 2017, the conditions were perfect and the controlled fire successfully eliminated a majority of the hardstem bulrush and cattails. ESLT and CDFW staff have since returned to the ponds to hand-cut and mow down the remaining unwanted vegetation. Next, the water level in the ponds will be raised to drown out the burned and cut plants and CDFW will remove and relocate one of the pond's current non-native, aquatic residents, the Sacramento perch, which would make quick work of any speckled dace.

Once aggressive vegetation and non-native predators have been removed from the ponds, the sensitive Owens speckled dace will be safely returned to its historic home.

Improving pond habitat for this small fish means a healthier home for other wildlife, including ducks, grebes, and herons. "We're looking forward to witnessing first-hand the positive impact these changes will bring," commented Kay Ogden, ESLT Executive Director. "And we're so grateful to Bill Bramlette for this unique opportunity to restore the speckled dace to its historic habitat—as well as for all the knowledge and resources he has shared with us to help make this project come to life. We are also grateful to the Bureau of Land Management, CalFire, CDFW and to Bill Bramlette's neighbors, Karen and James Smart, for their assistance on the day of the burn."

Through a partnership with Bramlette, ESLT has hosted events at the privately owned Benton ponds, giving the community the opportunity to view unusual birds and other Eastern Sierra wildlife in their natural habitat. ESLT hopes to hold more such events in the future, once the project nears completion.

"Getting the chance to bring local school children and their families to this land to learn about birds, geology, and the pond ecosystem is a true gift," Ogden reflected. "We all treasure our visits to this unique place. There's so much to see and learn. And if the Owens speckled dace is able to regain a foothold here, what an amazing outdoor classroom this would become for us all."

Funding for this project is generously provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Desert Fish Habitat Partnership.

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*Sample, low-resolution pictures and suggested captions provided below; high-resolution images attached to email. For additional pictures, please contact Marguerite Merritt, ESLT Communications Director, at [marguerite@eslt.org](mailto:marguerite@eslt.org).*



*Photo 1 Caption: ESLT and CDFW partners are all smiles as the Benton Ponds Restoration Project hits a major milestone. From left: Susanna Danner, ESLT staff; Steve Parmenter, CDFW Biologist; Sara Kokkelenberg, ESLT staff; Kay Ogden, ESLT staff; and Tim Bartley, ESLT volunteer and Board Member.*



*Photo 2 Caption: The CalFire crew keeps a careful watch on the controlled burn at the Benton Ponds. By removing aggressive vegetation, partners on this restoration project hope to create ideal habitat for a rare desert fish, the Owens speckled dace.*



Photo 3 caption: *The controlled burn was deemed a resounding success – but much habitat restoration work remains before the sensitive speckled dace can be introduced to its new home. Here, members of the CDFW restoration team, including lead Biologist Steve Parmenter (center), head out to the ponds to remove remaining vegetation.*

**Additional Images of the Prescribed Burn at the Benton Ponds:**



Photo 4



Photo 5