

January , 2021

Nicole McGinnis
Environmental Program Manager
City of San Diego
Public Utilities

Dear Ms. McGinnis

On behalf of the San Diego Audubon Society and our 3,000+ members, I am communicating our concerns about the potential negative effects of water level management to wildlife nesting at Lake Hodges and request your attention and cooperation.

Both Western and Clark's Grebes use Lake Hodges, and the worldwide population of Clark's Grebes is stable but is declining (7,300-14,000 individuals, IUCN). The San Diego Bird Atlas (Unitt 2004), notes that Lake Hodges supports the highest recruitment (production of young that contribute to the population) of Western Grebes across the whole county, the most important area for this species to nest in the county. It is also important habitat for recruitment of Clark's Grebes.

Grebe nesting colonies at Lake Hodges have collapsed several years in a row due to the lowering of lake levels after late season rain events. In the spring of 2019, lake levels were dropped 8ft overnight, and hundreds of nests became inaccessible to the grebes. Thanks to the attention from the public requesting cessation of drawing more water and causing further destruction of nests, the drainage was halted and later that season some Grebes were able to build new nests.

In 2020 the Grebes nested during a significant rain event and this time the lake was lowered too slowly to the required 295ft to support the nesting Grebes. Although we advised biologists from the city that Grebes build nests very quickly (in a 24-hour time span) and requested that the lake should be lowered in less than a week's time, the City did not take action quickly enough and it took two and half weeks to lower the water. Again hundreds of viable Grebe nests with eggs were lost.

We request that water levels be maintained at 290-295ft, or 20ft below spill level, as this ensures this area where the Grebes have unsuccessfully nested stays dry and does not attract them to a location that will not remain acceptable nesting habitat for long enough to successfully hatch eggs. If water enters this area, it should be lowered within five days to avoid ultimately unsuccessful nest building and egg laying. We also believe that maintaining a stable water level will support new habitat growth elsewhere on the lake in an area that will be more resilient to changes in the water level and more suitable to successful nesting. We know this area well and have evidence that this is happening. This [website](#) has useful information on the full timeline and more information about grebes.

We are also requesting to read and provide input to the water level management protocols at Lake Hodges, especially as they pertain to significant rain events that can change water levels dramatically and with terrible consequences for Grebe nesting colonies. When a situation similar to 2020 arises again, we would like to ensure that excess water is drained quickly to avoid loss of viable Grebe nests. We are requesting to review the processes in the city's management plan and work with the City if needed. We are requesting for the Water Systems Operations within the Public Utilities Department prioritize maintaining lake levels consistent with the new level mandates and to share or have us work collaboratively on a plan that protects Grebes to the maximum extent possible.

As City residents, we enjoy Lake Hodges. We are proud that Lake Hodges and the surrounding areas are recognized as a Globally Important Bird Area designated by the National Audubon Society. There has been great work accomplished by preserving and enhancing the natural environment with the JPA's San Dieguito River Park trail system as well as efforts directly within the Public Utilities purview. The area is home to species of concern including Gnatcatchers and Cactus Wrens that can be attributed to the revitalization of this area. We hope to work cooperatively with the City to improve the area further.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



James A. Peugh
Conservation Chair
peugh@cox.net

and



Krisztina Scheeff
KS Nature Photography
Conservation Committee