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Laguna plan brings out its share of critics

\$3.4 million joint effort outlined

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The Sonoma County Water Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers are looking for ways to restore the Laguna de Santa Rosa, but county residents Thursday were skeptical of the \$3.4 million effort.

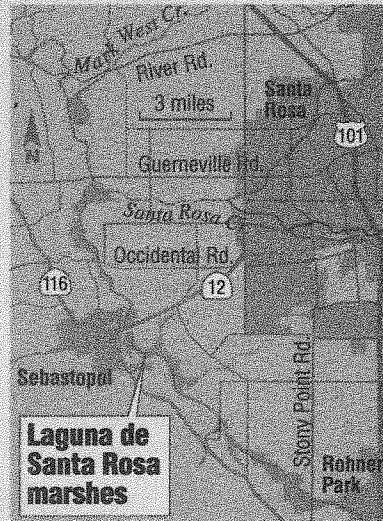
Critics said the two agencies are responsible for some of the environmental problems of the laguna, a once-vast wetland that is steadily shrinking.

The laguna, which stretches about 11 miles from Rohnert Park to the Russian River, is filling with sediment, according to scientific studies. As a result, it holds less water during big storms, raising flood levels in the lower Russian River.

Sedimentation also is making the laguna less of a refuge for native plants and wildlife, including several endangered species.

The sediment comes from urban development and farming, including hillside vineyards, according to studies.

On Thursday, the Water Agency and corps outlined a joint effort to



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examine the problem and recommend steps to reverse the trend.

At the end of the four-year study, they're expected to ask Congress to pay for a restoration program.

About 100 county residents turned out for Thursday's workshop at Piner High School in Santa Rosa. Many of them questioned the study, saying they doubt it will tackle the underlying reasons for the laguna's plight.

They noted it won't address re-

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strictions on growth or hillside planting.

Others said the water agency and corps sponsor projects that endanger the laguna, including flood control channels.

The corps allows developers to fill vernal pools, which are an integral part of the laguna ecosystem, according to critics.

Kim Cordell of the Laguna Foundation, an environmental group, said the study should consider the importance of vernal pools.

While some speakers at Thursday's workshop said dredging is needed to restore the laguna, others said dredging would be too destructive.

Officials of the Water Agency and corps acknowledged they won't be addressing larger issues, such as growth and hillside farming.

But Bob Morrison of the Water Agency said the study should identify sources of sedimentation and suggest ways to reduce it.

Roger Golden, the corps' laguna project manager, agreed to meet with local groups interested in restoring the waterway.

According to earlier studies, the laguna is a fraction of its former size, but it remains the second largest freshwater wetland complex in coastal Northern California.

The wetlands have been drained for farming and development. Santa Rosa's treated wastewater is used to irrigate farmland in the area and discharged into the laguna during the rainy season.

Morrison said the laguna holds back water during major storms, reducing flood levels in the lower Russian River. But much of the laguna's flood control capacity has been lost in recent years, he said.