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Laguna, Fort Ross may benefit from bonds victory

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BY TOM ROTH

West county may reap an environmental bonanza, thanks to a bonds issue approved by voters last week.

Proposition 70, approved by California voters June 7, will provide for the issuance of bonds totaling \$766 million. Money from sale of the bonds is earmarked for the purchase of lands with high environmental values.

Among those lands in Sonoma County tentatively targeted for purchase are areas within the Laguna de Santa Rosa near Sebastopol and in Kolmer Gulch, forested land in the hills above Fort Ross State Park. All properties will be purchased at or below fair market value from willing sellers.

The state Wildlife Conservation Board and the Coastal Conservancy will each be appropriated \$4 million for wetlands and coastal purchases. The wildlife board is currently looking at buying land in the Laguna, a wetlands that both the city of Sebastopol and the county Fish and Game

Commission are interested in restoring to a more natural state.

The Laguna wetlands, once host to hundreds of species of wildfowl and a rich fishing habitat, has suffered from infill, pollution, and degradation of natural habitats. Today encroached by homes and roads, its green and blue sward once stretched freely from Sebastopol to Rohnert Park.

According to Joan Vilms, the director of the Sonoma Land Trust, a nonprofit group that handles land transactions for conservation purposes, about 70 acres of Laguna land has already been offered for sale by landowners.

"There's a lot of good energy in Sebastopol over the Laguna," said Vilms. "People are aware of its value and are willing to make some trade-offs."

Vilms said that property owners, aware that only so much money is available for purchases, are often willing to sell for a bargain price. "They get the cash and a tax

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write-off," she said.

"Prime habitat areas suitable for wildlife are being identified right now," added Vilms. "Not that they all will ultimately be purchased, but we need to know if they are eligible for purchase."

San Francisco's pioneering conservation group, the Save-the-Redwoods League, may help make possible a huge park acquisition on the coast. According to league director John DeWitt, the group is in contact with Louisiana Pacific, owners of the Kolmer Gulch property—1600 acres, mostly forested, extending from beaches near the reconstructed Russian settlement at Fort Ross to scenic Sea View Ridge.

Another provision of Proposition 70 made \$12 million available throughout the state to buy land for redwood state parks. The league is willing to match its money with the state's for the purchase of Kolmer Gulch.

"This is pretty historic land," DeWitt said.

Kolmer Gulch has probably the oldest second-growth redwoods in the state, related DeWitt. First-growth trees on the property were logged by the Russians in the 1830s, to build the original Fort Ross settlement and stockade. Later, the property became part of the sprawling Call ranch.

In recent years Kolmer Gulch has been operated as a "tree farm" by the Louisiana Pacific Company. Last year, the company's logging operations were halted by a court order, after a judge ruled that LP had not taken into account the cumulative adverse environmental impacts of reharvesting the property over a relatively short period.

Proposition 70 was put on the ballot through a grassroots effort by environmentalists angered by Governor Deukmejian's veto of a similar legislative effort. This is the first time in the history of the state that voters have approved bond-supported purchases of parklands.