

Santa Rosa faces tough standards Laguna-River sewer plans

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Laguna silence. But a furor is stirring over Santa Rosa plans to restore the wetlands with treated wastewater.

-photo by Maureen Hurley

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The city of Santa Rosa will face tough environmental and regulatory challenges if they select the Russian River as their long-range effluent disposal conduit.

This week both the Sierra Club and the regional Water Quality Control Board outlined their concerns over new Santa Rosa proposals being developed. The city is presently looking into the possibility of using highly polished wastewater to revitalize the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a wetlands between Sebastopol and Santa Rosa that drains into the Russian River.

Santa Rosa officials are hoping that a plan that would revitalize the Laguna would be palatable to environmentalists who have gone on record opposing increased river discharges.

Several members of Sebastopol's Laguna Committee, a group that recently prepared a report on Laguna restoration for the city, have indicated that increased discharges of highly treated effluent might be beneficial to the wetlands.

In opposition, the Redwood Chapter of the Sierra Club, under the new leadership of clean-water activist Brenda Adelman, sharply rebuked the city this week in a message to the Board of Supervisors. Adelman called the "Marsh in the Laguna" concept a "carrot" to convince environmentalists of the benefits of Laguna-River discharges.

Meanwhile water board Executive Officer Ben Kor, said this week that if a River plan were to be acceptable, the city would be held to some very high standards. Any increased amounts of wastewater headed for the Russian River must be treated so that it is "indistinguishable from the receiving waters," said Kor.

Santa Rosa's plans are far from firm, but city officials are talking about new ways to clean their wastewater so that they may be permitted to discharge into the River the increased amounts in needed to keep up with growth. At the same time, the city is also preparing design studies for an ocean outfall off the Sonoma coast.

Under normal conditions, Santa Rosa is permitted to discharge treated wastewater into the Russian River at a 1 percent dilution during winter months. The board has specified that under weather conditions that preclude land disposal options, the amount can be increased to 5 percent. However, that "safety valve" will be revoked in 1990.

The Sierra Club's Adelman is taking the hard line on discharges. She says that she would like to see a "wildlife enhancing marsh" added to the system, but she opposes any River releases over 1 percent. Bob Sharp, an environmental biologist

who headed Sebastopol's Laguna Committee, says he personally prefers a restriction to 5 percent if a sufficiently clean product is produced.

But water board officials say that even a 5 percent dilution rate will not be enough to safely empty the city's storage ponds in the next decade.