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# Plans for Laguna federal wildlife refuge unveiled

BY TOM ROTH

A report calling for the creation of a Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge — to be created by legislation that Rep. Douglas Bosco said that he would introduce within weeks — was released Tuesday.

If the legislation is successful, a huge wetlands, home to bald eagles and egrets, transversed by salmon and steelhead, and supporting dozens of rare and endangered plant species, would be preserved and restored — and protected from urban encroachment.

The report, written by the Laguna Technical Committee, a panel composed of local environmentalists and government officials, created at Bosco's behest last year, calls for the acquisition of 9,000 acres of wetlands, increased cooperation between local, state, and federal agencies, and a comprehensive management plan that would ensure protection of wildlife and water resources.

"We've gone to long not paying attention to this asset," said Bosco at what is for him a rare press conference, held at the Santa Rosa City Council Chambers. "I will introduce legislation to make the Laguna de Santa Rosa a federal wildlife refuge."

Roughly 2,075 acres of the Laguna are already in public hands. Another 5,890 acres would be acquired, using about \$4 million in state Prop 70 funds and \$13.7 million that Bosco would try to get appropriated out of federal wetlands preservation funds. Purchases would be made from willing sellers only.

SEE LAGUNA PAGE 13

THE WEST SONOMA COUNTY PAPER JANUARY 19-25, 1989

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## LAGUNA

FROM PAGE 1

According to Joan Vilms, a committee member who is also the director of the Sonoma Land Trust, property owners have three choices for transactions. They could elect to sell their land outright, sell conservation easements which would restrict development, or sell remainder interests, which would allow owners to collect payments now and keep their land until they die.

Bill Cox, State Fish and Game's representative on the committee, said that he anticipates no new level of regulations on the Laguna once it becomes a Wildlife Refuge, and that it should not interfere with agricultural operations.

But Bosco, noting that not all the Laguna land will come under direct federal control, said that "doesn't imply that they (those who own land in the Laguna, but do not wish to sell) will be able to use land in a way incompatible with the refuge."

The Laguna is a vast wetlands extending from the western outskirts of Rohnert Park to the southern boundaries of Forestville. Possibly once an extension of San Francisco Bay, and historically a winter overflow area for the Russian River, the basin has suffered environmental degradation by grazing, in-filling, and development. Despite these problems, however, the Laguna supports a diversity of habitats containing rare and endangered species of birds and plants, as well as thousands of migratory birds and local and anadromous fish.

Higher portions of the Laguna form pasture lands which are irrigated in the summer with treated wastewater from the Santa Rosa regional subsystem. In the winter, the city releases its effluent into the Laguna from where it enters Mark West Creek, the route to the Russian River.

What may be the most controversial aspect of the report is the recommendation that some parts of the Laguna be "enhanced" with water in summer months. That could mean that Santa Rosa effluent could find its way to the Russian River when the river is heavily used for recreational purposes, a practice that is now prohibited by state water regulators. How much reclaimed water might be used for enhancement purposes would be determined by state and federal management plans, states the report.

The report also recommends that areas that support Valley Oaks, a species that suffers from summer soakings, not be irrigated, as is presently done by the city, which irrigates.

Santa Rosa Assistant City Manager Jan Dolan said that the city sees Laguna restoration as a very "positive" development. Dolan said that Santa Rosa would "probably not" have any difficulties with a refuge, no matter which of its long-range wastewater disposal plans is finally chosen.

"The water balance is important," said Dolan. "But it is our feeling that the amount of water used for enhancement is not immense, and it should work with any disposal plan."