

EMPIRE NEWS

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EPA wetlands policy welcomed

Lawmakers, activists happy with limits

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Sonoma County conservationists and legislators say the federal Environmental Protection Agency's new wetlands policy will restrict development in marshes and estuaries.

"It's great," said south Sonoma County Supervisor James Harber-son. "It will be much more difficult for private developers to fill in wetlands," he said.

The strongly worded new policy is designed to regulate development and restore habitat in wetland areas. Local officials say it may eliminate the confusion that frequently occurs when someone wants to develop in marshy areas along lagoons, estuaries and rivers.

Janet Nicholas, supervisor from the Sonoma area, said the board often finds itself in a quandary over applications involving wetland areas because current regulations are unclear.

"The real question is how do you define a wetland?" That might sound odd, but battles have occurred over that question.

Phillip Oshida, EPA's San Francisco area wetlands expert, said the new policy carries specific guidelines which, for the first time, will be adopted by all the different federal agencies that regulate development in wetlands. Among them are the Army Corps of Engineers, the Fish and Wildlife and Soil Conservation services.

Besides tightening up definitions and toughening up regulations by federal agencies, the EPA also intends to work more closely with local and county governments on wetlands policies, by offering edu-

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caution and technical assistance, he said.

Sebastopol has taken the lead in Sonoma County with protection for marshy areas with a policy governing development along the Laguna de Santa Rosa and a special wetlands district where development guidelines are different than elsewhere.

The city struggled for years over a policy similar to the EPA's goal of "no net loss," meaning that if development takes place in a wetland area, compensation must be made by restoring an area of equal size and environmental quality.

California Fish and Game biologist Allan Buckman, who frequently speaks at hearings on applications for local projects involving wetlands, said he expects the EPA policy to lend weight to his agency's recommendations. He said it

comes none too soon.

"People don't know how valuable wetlands are. They're critical to clean water, fish, birds, wildlife, flood protection and soil conservation," he said.

Sonoma County, along with most of the rest of California, has lost 85 to 90 percent of its wetlands over the last century, he said.

"EPA is trying to set the stage for the nation in terms of protecting a valuable resource," said Oshida.

The policy also encourages restoration and preservation of wetland areas, such as County of Sonoma, the non-profit Sonoma Land Trust and California Department of Fish and Game are doing with marshes along San Pablo Bay and the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

"I think it's long past due," said environmentalist Darryl Thurner, who is working with local organizations striving to protect and revive wetlands. Among such groups are the Conservation Committee of the Audubon Society and the Sonoma County Conservation Council.