

Bosco introduces Laguna refuge bill

BY TOM ROTH

North Coast Congressman Doug Bosco introduced a bill this week to establish a federally-protected wildlife refuge in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

The long anticipated legislation aims at setting aside 9000 acres of wetlands between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, and restoring it so that hundreds of species of plants and animals can thrive in the heart of the Santa Rosa plain.

The proposed refuge would be jointly managed by the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Wildlife Service. The government agencies would develop plans to return much of the Laguna to its natural state, while allowing present agricultural use to continue. Filtered wastewater from the Santa Rosa subregional system still would be discharged into the Laguna, and conceivably be used for wetland habitat "enhancement."

"The discharge from Santa Rosa would have to be compatible with the fish and wildlife use of the Laguna," said Bosco Tuesday. "Natural uses will take precedence over human uses."

The area now supports an estimated 286 species of plants, 230 bird species, 25 mammal species, 19 fish species, 7 amphibian species and 9 species of reptile. Rare and endangered species include the bald eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and the Sonoma meadowfoam, a wildflower.

Bosco said that Santa Rosa plans to build a golf course on the east side of the Laguna would probably not be "acceptable" to wildlife managers. The city owns about 2000 acres in the area.

The Congressman foresees little opposition in Congress—noting that his plan harmonizes with a Bush administration pledge to preserve wetlands.

The bill now goes to the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee where Bosco has been a member for eight years.

At home, the bill is widely supported by environmentalists and the Sebastopol City Council, but is viewed with suspicion, if not

hostility, by Laguna area farmers.

Bosco has assured farmers that land for the refuge would be acquired only from willing sellers. The only major restriction that the refuge would bring would be a ban on pesticides, he said.

Farmer Jim Dei said that farmers use few pesticides and chemical fertilizers in the area right now, and that a complete ban would not bring undue hardships.

But fearing yet unknown restrictions, Dei's said he's not willing to support the refuge "until we see exactly how it is going to affect us." He does believe, however, that a management plan compatible with agriculture can be worked out.

Stan Denner, who farms the Santa Rosa end of the Laguna, says that he fears new restrictions on his agricultural practices and littering crowds of tourists that the refuge might bring. Given the pressures of government encroachment, unwilling sellers may turn into willing sellers, he said.

"On city-owned property, I have no objections, but when you start incorporating private property, then I have problems," said Denner.

Denner, a director with the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, said that bureau directors almost unanimously opposed the refuge in a straw vote last April. He predicted that the bureau will organize opposition against the bill.

Bob Sharp, a retired biologist, who heads the Laguna Scoping Committee, predicted that if the bill passes it will take many years for the refuge to become a viable wildlife sanctuary. Because of the reluctance of farmers to sell their land, "For awhile we might have a checkerboard pattern," he said.

"Its advantages are that it will protect open space, bring more tourism, create a quality wildlife habitat, and interesting field lab," said Sharp.

Sharp headed Sebastopol's Laguna Committee, which last year released a report which initiated preservation efforts by Sebastopol, the county and Bosco's office.