

# Laguna lovers seek common ground

BY BRUCE ROBINSON

The history, future and troubled present of the Laguna de Santa Rosa were explored in depth Saturday at an all-day conference that informally set the stage for coordination of efforts to revive the wildlife habitat of the once-thriving waterway.

More than 200 people attended the first-ever "State of the Laguna" conference and heard more than two dozen speakers over nine hours as they detailed the present condition of the wetlands area between Sebastopol and Santa Rosa and outline future visions for it.

## Wetlands Controversy

Senator Dan Denner, State Senator Dan Denner, opened the conference. Dairy farmer Dan Bosco opened the

Dairy farmer Stan Denner also offered a

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day on an optimistic note, explaining the goals of his recently introduced bill to create a 9,000 acre national wildlife preserve in the Laguna. One objective, he said, is to "bring back [wildlife] species that have long since disappeared" from the venerable waterway, but a more immediate need is to overcome the "considerable controversy" that has arisen locally in response to his bill.

The focus for the morning session was background, including explanations of Santa Rosa's current wastewater reclamation practices, county flood control efforts, and a technical analysis of the Laguna's water quality.

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some of the few skeptical remarks, representing existing agricultural interests who fear that the preserve Bosco envisions will compromise the economic viability of the farms and ranches that have been there for generations. He was particularly critical of proposals to create public access trails within the reserve. "As soon as you have public trails, all the wildlife leaves," Denner scoffed.

The emphasis shifted to the future in the afternoon, which Assemblyman Dan Hauser opened with a brief recap of the political process that led to the creation of the Arcata marsh, a model wastewater project that "demonstrated that reclaimed effluent could be used as a resource," he said.

## Restore water quality

Hauser's experience echoed in the optimism expressed by Guerneville resident Tom Lynch, who agreed that "a restored Laguna could do much to restore the water quality downstream in the Russian River." Lynch again sounded the call for stricter limits on effluent discharges into the River, which he said are needed as "incentive" for Santa Rosa to follow through with the implementation of the various progressive reclamation efforts now under study. But he added that if those projects are carried out, the region will be able to boast "the most exemplary wastewater system on the planet."

Lynch was the last speaker on an eight-member panel offering perspectives on future planning for the Laguna, and it was this group that delivered the day's most thought-provoking commentary. Sebastopol City Councilman Nick Stewart, in the course of analyzing regional transportation impacts on the Laguna, forecast a need for Sonoma County cities to "fix our urban boundaries" over the next decade and develop "different patterns of densities" to locate more housing adjacent to transportation corridors.

Frank Denny, president of the Building Industry Association, suggested that the Laguna might become the site of a variety of off-site mitigation work, to be performed as part of urban development at locations removed from the waterway.

But all the hopes of environmental restoration that were expressed throughout the day were balanced by the repeated concerns of property owners in the flood plain.

Suzanne Nelson, an active environmentalist and member of the Sebastopol Laguna Committee whose home

overlooks the main Laguna channel, admitted that she has had second thoughts about allowing public access.

Neighboring dairyman Bob Beretta expressed the frustration of owning 400 acres near the Laguna. "Everybody wants to tell us what to do with it," he complained. "We have questions but nobody has any answers for us."

Occidental rancher Dwight Caswell, representing the Sonoma County Farmlands Group, addressed questions about pesticide use and water quality. The greater problem, he said, is cow manure that gets washed into the water. While measures can be taken to curtail or eliminate those problems, "The costs cannot be borne by agriculture alone," he argued.

Vineyards do not pose the same runoff difficulties as cattle operations, Caswell added, as the chemicals used on the grapes are applied sparingly and break down quickly in sunlight. Because of its intensive cultivation, "A vineyard is a desert for wildlife," he cautioned, before adding that they are "compatible with a preserve next door."

## Managing the Laguna

Allan Buckman of the local state Fish & Game office portrayed the Laguna as "representative of our regional need for resource management." Regardless of the fate that greets the Bosco bill, "We need resource plans!" he asserted.

Some of the most warmly welcomed comments came from a member of the audience. Dennis Martinez, a Native American native plant propagation worker from Ya-Ka-Ama, called on everyone present to rethink the apparent conflicts between various uses for the Laguna. "If we don't consider agriculture and ecology as one, we are doomed," he stated, citing the historic land management practices of his Indian forefathers as a worthy precedent.

Santa Rosa Utilities Director Miles Ferris, who had the difficult chore of summarizing the day's proceedings, stressed the need for building consensus among the diverse views represented at the conference. "If we're going to be successful [in preserving the laguna and its ecology], we're going to have to reach common ground on such issues as development versus the environment," Ferris said. "To fight is to fail."

The creation of that consensus will be an ongoing process, but many of the participants and observers at the Saturday conference felt that substantial, if intangible, progress was made that during that day.