

Guest speaker

Laguna's fate in Congress' hands

by Robert Sharp

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Our much-abused Laguna may be getting a new lease on life, after a century and a half of abuse and neglect. On July 31, the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries held its first hearing on H.R. 2548, Congressman Bosco's bill to establish a National Wildlife Refuge on approximately 9,000 acres in the Laguna Basin.

Since 1976, four separate studies of the Laguna have been carried out by various citizen's groups. The most recent being the report by the Laguna Technical Advisory Committee, appointed by Congressman Bosco in August, 1988. This body, consisting mainly of representatives of the land and water use agencies, completed its study in January 1989. The main thrust of this report was the firm recommendation for the establishment of a National Wildlife Refuge.

There exists an immediate and compelling rationale for using federal funds to acquire lands within the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a National Wildlife Refuge. Despite the loss of hundreds of acres of Laguna wetlands, much wetland habitat remains, and considerable acreage can be restored to wetland status. Existing wetlands are under increasing threat from advancing urbanization. While state and local preservation efforts are underway, only the federal government possesses the resources capable of providing the type of sustained extensive land acquisition program necessary to halt the degradation of this valuable wetland area. Inasmuch as wetland preservation and an increase in wetland acreage has been recognized as a national goal, the Laguna de Santa Rosa should be considered a high national priority for protection. It has the distinction of being the second largest fresh water marsh in Northern California, second only to the Clear Lake marshes in Lake County.

The capacity of the Laguna to support and enhance specific fish and wildlife populations also warrants federal involvement. With the passage of Public Law 100-653, the Congress and the president have initiated a major federal commitment to restoring the salmon and steelhead resources of the Russian River basin. As a major southern tributary of the Russian River, the Laguna was at one time as important nursery area for these fisheries. Properly managed it could be so again. Restoration of the Laguna habitat would thus greatly enhance the future effectiveness of any federally sponsored Russian River fishery restoration program.

As an important wintering and nesting area for migratory waterfowl, the Laguna can also play an important role as a key waterfowl habitat along the federally managed Pacific Flyway. Not only will wetlands be protected, but under a resource management plan the acreage of wetlands will be substantially increased.

Finally, the Laguna is the type location for the California fresh water shrimp, federally designated endangered species. The long-term survival of this species may rely, to a considerable extent, on the preservation and restoration of its habitat in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

The role of the Laguna as a flood water storage basin should be pointed out. At elevation of 76 feet, the 7,000 acre basin store 80,000 acre feet of water, thus substantially reducing the flood crest at downstream communities such as Guerneville.

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