

# Make the Laguna a wildlife refuge

## CLOSE TO HOME

By ROBERT W. 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 will hold its first hearing on H.R. 2548, Congressman Doug Bosco's bill to establish a National Wild-

life 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, to be managed cooperatively by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game, two of the principal land use agencies involved in the study.

Earlier studies have pointed out the problems associated with the conflicting management policies resulting from the fact that 20 or more federal, state, county and municipal bodies have a responsibility for, or an interest in, management of the Laguna. These bodies do not work in concert, and indeed policies may sometimes be in direct conflict. The placing of management authority in two major land and water use agencies should solve most of these problems.

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 an 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, a 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 will store 80,000 acre feet of water, thus substantially reducing the flood crest at downstream communities such as Guerneville and Monte Rio.

The value of the Laguna as a unique outdoor school room and laboratory for the study of plant and animal ecology should not be overlooked. Within a 10-mile radius are the communities of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Rohnert Park and Cotati. These communities support two colleges and several high schools. The Marin County-based Terwilliger Nature Education Foun-

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dation is already using the area as a field laboratory. Students from Sonoma State University have carried out several environmental studies in the Laguna.

A quick look at the geography, geology, cultural resources, plant and animal ecology of the Laguna is in order:

It is located in South Central Sonoma County, approximately 50 miles north of San Francisco, in the Russian River watershed. The Laguna may once have been an extension of San Francisco Bay, at a time when the Russian River flowed into the Bay. Seismic activity, at an unknown pre-historic date, may have altered the lower reaches of the Russian River.

The Laguna is a complex system of wetland and upland habitats, including: open water, emergent marsh, riparian forest, vernal pools, oak savanna, oak woodland and grassland. The great diversity of habitat types is unique, as California fresh water marshes go.

Previous studies indicate the presence of 286 species of plants, 230 species of birds (a 20-year bird list kept by a local ornithologist), 25 species of mammals, 19 fish species, seven amphibians and nine species of reptiles. Several species of endangered or threatened plants and animals are included in this listing.

In the way of cultural resources, for thousands of years the Pomo Indians made their home in and around the Laguna.

A total of 76 archeological sites have been identified below the 90-foot contour level. Many of these have not been studied thoroughly. With further exploration archeologists expect to find many more sites. Archeologists consider the Laguna to be an exceptional and unique data base for the study of historic Coastal California.

Robert Sharp of Sebastopol is chairman of the Laguna Technical Advisory Committee.