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Laguna wildlife refuge plans are dead ...for now

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by Andrew Jowers

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is proposing to buy and preserve areas of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a project laguna preservationists applaud but feel falls short of the 9,000-acre federal wildlife refuge previously envisioned.

The Corps, with about \$25 million earmarked for a restoration project in the area, could buy up to 1,000 laguna acres. And it would do so only from willing sellers, a major sticking point in former Rep. Doug Bosco's efforts to protect Northern California's second largest freshwater marsh system.

The Bosco bill creating a national wildlife preserve along the waterway won House approval last year, but the Sebastopol Democrat was unseated before a Senate vote. Bosco's successor, Rep. Frank Riggs (R-Windsor), supports the Corps proposal because, said Riggs' spokesman Tom Roth, the deficit-minded Congress is unlikely to approve an expensive federal preserve project.

"It doesn't have a chance in the 102nd Congress," said Roth. While the Corps proposal of-

fers some protection to the laguna and is better than nothing, preserving only 1,000 acres will not preserve the laguna as an entire ecosystem, says Ann Magnie, Sebastopol City Councilwoman and long-time laguna advocate.

There is also the chance that the Corps, committed to buying only from landowners willing to sell, will be forced to purchase parcels of land, "40 acres here, 40 acres there," rather than a single large section of the laguna, said Bob Sharp, a retired fisheries biologist who worked on the national refuge legislation.

Although the Bosco bill initially contained a willing-seller clause, meaning the federal or state government could not force landowners to sell through eminent domain, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service insisted the provision be removed since it would have set a precedent.

Under the Corps proposal, the county or state Fish and Game Department, not a federal agency, would probably manage the purchased acres, said Roth, noting the Corps has agreed to a willing-seller provision.

While the proposal is still in its infancy and there are no concrete details, the Sonoma County Farm Bureau supports it in concept because of the willing-seller provision and because it involves less acreage than Bosco's plan, said Domenic Carinalli, past bureau president and member of the land use committee.

"We won't support any plan (Please see Laguna page A12)

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that doesn't include a willing seller clause — that's our Number One concern," he said, adding that a 9,000-acre preserve "was way too big."

Riggs is encouraging the Corps to allow "conservation easements," in which farmers are paid to curtail farming practices thought harmful to the laguna, said Roth. This idea, which could involve fencing off fragile areas from cattle, al-

lows farmers to keep their land in production, and "might bring some of the unwilling sellers on board," he said.

Carinalli agreed, noting that the method has worked elsewhere. "If you offer a farmer a good enough deal, he'll take it," he said.

By law, the Corps must compensate for environmental damage done to creeks and streams during the construction of Warm Springs Dam near Healdsburg, and a project such as laguna restoration was required as a condition for building the dam.

However, there is competition for another preservation project: reviving the fish and wildlife in the Russian River, particularly steelhead and salmon populations.

The Corps is expected to hold hearings this summer in Sonoma County to gauge community support for its plan. Whatever the fate of the Corps proposal, which does not require passage of federal legislation, Riggs may one day introduce a new laguna preserve bill should Congress appear receptive, said Roth.

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