

Wetlands in Sonoma County



Photo by Kerry Richardson

Wetlands throughout Sonoma County include the Laguna de Santa Rosa, Estero Americana, Bodega area coastal wetlands, seasonal pools, creeks, marshes and water storage ponds.

The Vernal Pool Task Force consists of 15 members representing a spectrum of groups including the EPA, Corp of Engineers, US Fish and Wildlife, State Fish and Game, Sonoma County, City of Santa Rosa, the building industry, Habitat Mitigation Committee, Farm Bureau, California Native Plant Society, Sonoma County Wetland Watch, Sierra Club and local botanists. *For more information, call Tom Roth, Congressman Riggs' Office at 576-1466.*

■ **North American Waterfowl Management Plan:** Another effort which trickles down to Sonoma County is the implementation of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan which was established to help State and local agencies implement habitat enhancement programs for their areas using state and federal monies. To date a Pacific Coast Joint Venture has been established which includes Marin, Sonoma and Mendocino counties (Southern Implementation Committee).

A Sonoma County Subcommittee has been formed to inventory wetlands in Sonoma County. This subcommittee is composed of Joan Vilms, Chairperson; Carolyn Dixon, City of Santa Rosa; Karen Cahney, Circuit Riders; Kim Cordell, Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation; Tim Fitzpatrick, Ducks Unlimited; Clyde Nance, Madrone Audubon; and Donna Strom, Sonoma County Wetlands Watch. Their study will be submitted to the Fish & Wildlife Service in Portland. It will be combined with other areas and used for prioritizing the spending of various federal and state monies. The joint plan will be completed towards the Fall. *For more information, you can contact Ken Zanzi, Dept. of Fish & Game at (707)944-5522.*

■ The Laguna de Santa Rosa has received considerable attention. To date, the City of Sebastopol has adopted Policy No. 58 outlining statements supporting preservation of the Laguna; it has adopted a Wetlands Ordinance, which establishes three wetlands categories (Primary, Secondary, and Fringe).

A non-profit Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation has been formed which provides information to all parties involved in the various aspects of the Laguna. As part of their efforts, they have officially supported a State Assembly River Parkway Bill (Assemblyman Costa) which will provide money for planning river parkways, encouraging multiple jurisdictions to work together. If the bill passes, the cities of Sebastopol, Rohnert Park and Cotati could join efforts in obtaining money to create a master plan for the entire length of the Laguna, including the Santa Rosa Creek's Master Plan and Sebastopol's Laguna Park Master Plan. *For more information, call Kim Cordell, Executive Director at: (707)874-0100.*

■ **Restoration of Santa Rosa Creek:** A draft Santa Rosa Creek Master Plan has been completed which will create a 13 mile regional trail system reaching from Howarth Park to the Laguna. It includes an extensive restoration program and creates a link between the Santa Rosa's Railroad Square and the downtown. Some residents living close to the creek are concerned about the proximity of the path system to their property. Farmers, as well, have shown some concern about the acreage involved. As a compromise, the Committee for Restoring the Creek is recommending to route the path system and scale back the restoration area to 50 feet from the creek, which will still allow planting of trees and restoration of habitat.

The draft has been released. By the time you receive this publication the City of Santa Rosa's and County's Planning Commissions will have reviewed the proposal. There is still time to share your opinions with the Santa Rosa City Council and Board of Supervisors in May. It is important to

Worldwide, the greatest threats to the diversity of intact biological communities surrounding urban areas are the destruction of habitats and their conversion to agriculture; channelizing streams for flood control; draining and filling wetlands; and developing urban areas.

Sonoma County is not immune to the global destruction of biological communities.

Our wetlands are receiving a great deal of reevaluation by a number of agencies including regulatory, agricultural and development interests. Review has been fueled by pressure to annex and develop land in outlying areas of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Windsor and Rohnert Park which have either prime agricultural soils or wetlands. Some of this land contains endangered plant, bird or mammal species.

The destruction of just one component of a wetland can begin to dismantle the entire ecosystem. A vernal pool is a good example. A vernal pool provides a unique and rare environment in which a number of specialized plants and animals have evolved. Whole ecosystems reside in pools as small as a kitchen table. Some of the properties of these plants have economic and scientific significance, which may never be realized because of rapid losses of habitat. Vernal pools also store significant amounts of flood waters.

Our vernal pools are in jeopardy. A study of 77 vernal pools in the Santa Rosa Plains revealed that 91 percent of them were under one acre in size. This could hypothetically allow for legal destruction of 91 percent of any isolated pool under all regulations, possibly accelerating the extinction of one of three plant species recently listed as endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Some documented intentional destruction has been ongoing over the last few years as a means of increasing the development potential of some lands. Only one case so far has resulted in a mandated restoration.

Locally, the diversity of our wetlands (salt, seasonal, riparian, etc.) makes representation tough at best. Ambiguities in regulations which don't adequately address the importance of wetland ecosystems also hinder our ability to thoroughly protect and restore wetlands. These regulations don't offer substantive power to regulate, nor are they adequate to cover the size and scale of wetlands and endangered plants and animals. Few understand the connection between wetland protection and endangered species protection.

Additionally many proposed legislative actions from East Coast needs are in total ignorance of West Coast issues. As a result, management of many valuable water resources is dependant upon the individual land owner even if that owner is a developer, farmer or resident.

However, there are steps being taken to work within the existing regulations to protect wetlands to the degree possible.

■ **Vernal Pool Task Force:** This task force is sponsored by Congressman Riggs. Its purpose is to create a Habitat Conservation Plan which will provide County guidelines for dealing with wetlands, particularly with respect to three endangered plants. This effort is at the beginning stages. The Task Force hopes to obtain a "memorandum of understanding" from both the City of Santa Rosa and the County to officially begin funding efforts to procure the necessary funds to conduct the study. The study should take approximately one year to be completed. *Question: What will happen to existing vernal pools until the study is completed?*

THE LAGUNA PARK MASTER PLAN

Gary Hyden, a Sacramento landscape architect, and Marco Waaland, local Ecologist, are putting the final touches on a draft Laguna Park Master Plan. Public hearings will begin in May or June. Several important issues surfaced during meetings between the consultant, the public and the community's Technical Advisory Committee. One issue is the need for buffer strips up to 50 feet wide to separate urban uses from natural areas. Is 50' too much or too little? Another is an appropriate separation of active and passive recreation activities, again through adequate buffer zones. The most important single finding of the report is that the City has less than half the amount of recommended park land. The City simply does not have enough parks to meet the needs of all its citizens. Sebastopol can expect highly divisive arguments over their use as passive or active recreational areas until additional property is obtained. SCEIR will be informing you when the public hearings will be. In the meantime, for more information call: Richard Spitzer, Sebastopol City Planner at: 823-6167.

ALERT Laguna de Santa Rosa Threatened

Land Conversion: Approximately 12,000 acres of the Laguna have been converted to urban land use, cropland and orchard or vineyard. This acreage is now being managed as monocultures (orchards or vineyards) or rural residential/urban development with non-native landscape plants. The habitat type most affected by this practice is the oak woodland/vernal pool complex, which has the appropriate topography and soils for both agriculture and construction. The chances for biodiversity to exist under these circumstances are slight because of agricultural management practices (weed and pest abatement) or the desire for typical urban garden arrangements emphasizing attractive, "human scale" landscaping.

Urbanization: The greatest source of change in the Laguna area is a result of conversion to 7,037 acres of urban habitats (golf courses, tract homes, rural ranchettes, commercial buildings, etc.). Most of this conversion has created the effect of fragmenting the patches of natural land.

As part of SCEIR's ongoing dialogue on wetlands, we will be publishing a series entitled Changes to the Original Ecology of the Santa Rosa Plains and the Laguna de Santa Rosa which will cover the historical ecology, current threats and potential restoration. This series will be submitted by Marco Waaland, Ecologist.