

Wastewater Change may aid Laguna

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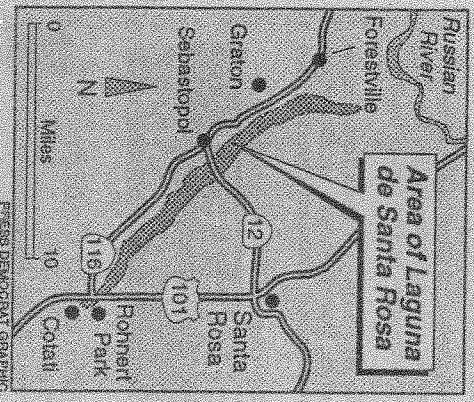
SEBASTOPOL — The wetlands and marshes of the Laguna de Santa Rosa could be making a comeback.

Marco Waaland, an ecologist hired by Sebastopol, said relaxed state guidelines mean treated wastewater from Santa Rosa's regional sewage treatment plant could be used during the summer to keep marsh areas "healthy and alive."

The extra water could help "push the Laguna into a condition where it has some semblance of its former ecological status," Waaland said.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a 13-mile-long wetlands between Sebastopol and Santa Rosa that once teemed with wildlife. Early settlers considered it a series of lakes, but farmers drained much of the land. It floods now only in winter, but still serves as habitat for a variety of animals, including migrating birds

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that stop en route from South America to Alaska.

Biologists are heartened by recent signs of steelhead fish making a tentative comeback in the Laguna, something Waaland attributes in part to better management of dairy farms.

"A lot of dairy waste really causes the majority of problems in the Laguna," he said. "To the extent we can keep flushing and clearing out pollutants in the Laguna, it will benefit wildlife."

Last Tuesday, the Sebastopol City Council got its first look at a master plan to restore to a more natural state about 325 acres of the Laguna next to Sebastopol.

Sebastopol council members praised the plan, which evolved from a series of community and planning commission meetings with the help of the hired consultants — Waaland, and Gary Hyden, a landscape architect.

The plan calls for seeding and replanting, recreational trails, buffer zones to protect against encroaching development and reestablishment of freshwater marshes.

Other features include building an amphitheater, reclaiming Sebastopol's old sewer ponds and expanding parking next to the existing youth park.

Another suggestion is re-creating examples of typical Native American thatch dwellings that were found in the area.

The plan will be discussed at a public hearing at the Sebastopol Veterans Building at 7 p.m. on Sept. 29.

Some Sebastopol residents wanted to see more "active" recreation developed as part of the Laguna park, in particular a new ball field for Little League. But the Planning Commission concluded although such a ball field is needed, it should be built somewhere else.

In a memo to the City Council, planning commissioners said an expanded ball field "will only offer a recreation activity for a limited age group," whereas developing the

Laguna de Santa Rosa Park for environmental education will offer recreation for all ages and "be available to an individual for an entire lifetime."

Biologists say if the Laguna is brought back to vitality, it could once again attract the endangered yellow-billed cuckoo, which hasn't been seen in the area since 1961, when much of the creekside forest was lost to channelization.

Waaland said recent state guidelines enabling Santa Rosa to discharge larger amounts of treated wastewater into the Laguna and the Russian River year-round will improve the Laguna's water quality, especially in the summer.

He noted that the sewage plant's wastewater pipelines, which are used to irrigate lands around the Laguna, can easily be used to create wetlands.

Sebastopol officials acknowledge that funding is uncertain for the estimated \$1.3 million it will take to develop the park plan, although there are a variety of public and private sources that might be tapped.