

# Laguna

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livestock. Those missing parts of the forest play an important part in purifying water and supporting diverse animal species.

"You have to have a lot of foresight to see what the Laguna could become," Bosco said. "It's not going to be paved over, that's not the issue. The issue is what a magnificent resource it could become, how much more biological diversity it could support."

## A home to wildlife

According to the 1988 report of the Laguna Technical Advisory Committee, which was chaired by Sharp, the Laguna is home to 286 species of plants, 230 bird species, 25 mammal species, seven amphibian species and nine reptile species.

During flood cycles, the report said, from 3,000 to 5,000 waterfowl use the area, a majority of the species in the Pacific Flyway.

Riggs pinned his hopes for Laguna restoration on money from the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps would restore large parts of the Laguna as a way to mitigate environmental damage done as a result of the construction of Warm Springs Dam.

"We thought we had a winner. But all of a sudden, out of the clear blue, they said they wouldn't go forward with it," Riggs said of the Corps' November 1992 announcement.

The list of alleged culprits is long. Bosco said Riggs "dropped the ball with the Corps of Engineers. They really have to be hammered constantly on something like this. They prefer to study things and feed their own bureaucracy. When it comes to actually getting out and doing things, they are reluctant."

## Belt-tightening victim?

Riggs denies that. "I was all over them on any number of issues. We had good contacts there; we had a good rapport with some top-level officials." He said he thinks the project was a victim of federal belt-tightening.

Santa Rosa ecologist Marco Waulund, who has been active in Laguna restoration, blames a letter-writing campaign to the Corps by some Russian River environmentalists who see the effort as a cover for increased wastewater discharges into the river system.

"It's a boogeyman, but there are

people who are not working on a factual basis on this issue. People get so invested in dogmatic ideas they ignore the science," Waulund said.

For its part, the Corps explains its actions more simply. In announcing the decision, the Corps said, when all information was gathered, it was determined that the Corps had no additional responsibility for mitigation efforts.

Whatever the reason, this became another dead end in the effort to restore the Laguna.

The Laguna figured prominently in the successful campaign to approve a 1/4-cent sales tax hike to fund open space purchases. David Hansen, manager of the county's Open Space District, said land in the Laguna is included in the district's acquisition plan, but is not a top priority.

Hansen said land purchases in the area by the city of Santa Rosa and the Fish and Game Department, plus the nature of the wetlands itself, makes any development there unlikely.

## Not highest priority

Also, the district is in the business of acquiring open space, not managing wildlife refuges. "We'd be concerned about the costs of management. If we did acquire land there, we would probably turn it over to Fish and Game to manage it."

"The Laguna is very high in our interest. It's just not the highest priority right now," said Hansen.

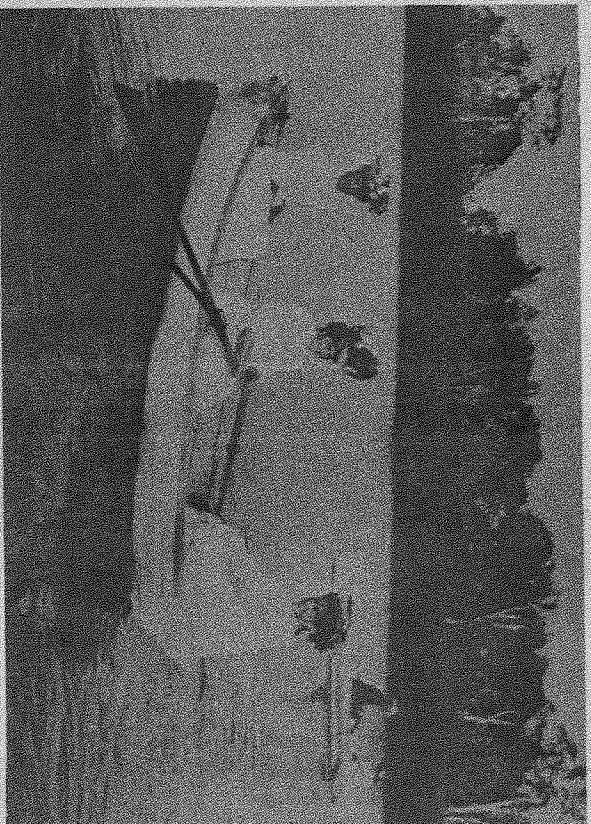
Buckmann said the state maintains a strong interest in the Laguna. Using money raised through Proposition 70 and endangered species funds, the state has quietly been buying some parcels in the Laguna, Buckmann said. Depending on how the acquisition of parcels comes together, Buckmann said, the state may be able to greatly improve public access to the Laguna.

The state is also working with the city of Santa Rosa, which lists Laguna restoration as a key part of its wastewater plans.

The use of Santa Rosa's treated wastewater in the Laguna may be a red flag to some Russian River residents. But Sharp thinks the wastewater can play a vital part in rejuvenating the Laguna.

"It's perfect for the use," Sharp said. "The problem is that we won't have it when we really need it."

The summer months, when much of the Laguna dries up, are when the Laguna could best use increased water releases. But it is the issue of wastewater releases in the summer months, when the Russian River is



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*Three women go boating on the Laguna de Santa Rosa, circa 1900. The Laguna once was a major recreation spot, offering a haven for hunters and fishermen.*

relatively low, that touches off particularly heated opposition from some downriver residents.

The other opposition to the original Laguna plan came from farmers in the affected area. Bosco stressed that his wildlife refuge would have involved purchases only from willing sellers. But that silenced only some of the opposition.

"They were worried more about what they wouldn't be able to do in that area rather than about land acquisition," said Bosco, pointing to the restrictions on farm practices that would be required in a wildlife refuge.

But even with some voices raised against the Laguna plan from the agriculture and downriver communities, the coalition behind it remains strong. Then, why isn't more being done?

## Bigger focus urged

"The 1988 report identified 40 different constituencies, agencies and private groups. They all have a responsibility or a major area of interest. No agency had final authority. That still prevails," Sharp said.

"We need to put a bigger focus on it, work through resource conservation districts, get more of the landowners to sign on," Buckmann said.

"We're right at a point now when we need to go into a combined city, county and state plan," he said. "I would love to see all the cities that

are impacting the watershed become part of the solution."

But he acknowledges that it is difficult to predict when that will happen.

"The Laguna could be a phenomenal amenity," Riggs said. "The trick is putting together the right public-private partnership that can access the dollars that are out there. I think that is going to be a real challenge for Lynn Woolsey."

## Woolsey's proposal

Woolsey's press aide Patrick Kowalczyk said: "Preserving the Laguna is definitely a priority for her, but she's not sure if the approach in Bosco's bill is the way to go. We're reaching out to the different groups that are involved to see what they think the best course of action should be."

Meanwhile, the Laguna remains an environmental asset that receives far too little attention.

The wetlands story that has been more in the news of late is the wetland that threatens the construction of the proposed Elsie Allen High School.

It's an interesting contrast — while we wade through a bureaucratic morass to protect a ephemeral wetland at that site, we are unable to mount a unified effort to do a better job protecting and managing an unquestioned environmental resource.

Perhaps because we have become better at stopping things than doing things.

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