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Morning on the Laguna de Santa Rosa: The 22-square-mile waterway in Sebastopol faces the same threats as wetlands across the nation—namely, fragmentation, or broken habitat—and decreasing biological diversity. "The key is not just protecting what we have left, because we've gone way beyond that," says Laguna Foundation executive director Kim Cordell. "We need to reassemble and re-establish a sustainable habitat. That takes more than laws—it requires a real community effort."

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Paradise Lost

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Despite strict regulations, we're losing America's wetlands

By SALLY DENEEN

SHE-CRAB SOUP arrives at restaurant tables on North Carolina's Outer Banks as a rich, sweet concoction, delighting tourists and new residents whose cars still boast license plates from their old states: Florida, Ohio, New York. As the ocean breezes sweep away the day-to-day worries of beach-bound visitors, Environmental Defense Fund scientist Doug Rader realizes the days of the regional soup may be numbered. It's a simple axiom: No wetlands, no seafood.

Across San Francisco Bay from the Golden Gate Bridge, the salty bay waters mingle with the melting snowcaps of the Sierra Mountains to form the largest estuary on the west coast of North and South America. Yet, almost all of the freshwater marshes in this California delta are gone. Half of the tidal marshes have been destroyed, while others have been transformed into surreal, sunken farmlands.

From the Gulf of Mexico's salt marshes to North Dakota's "prairie pot-holes," America's wetlands are disappearing rapidly, according to U.S. Fish

& Wildlife Service statistics comparing the Colonial 1780s to the 1980s.

The rate: an acre a minute. California has lost the greatest percentage (91 percent), but 21 other states have paved over or filled at least half of their original wetlands. Fast-growing Florida has filled in the most acreage—a land size bigger than all of Massachusetts, Delaware, and Rhode Island combined. Add the entire land size of California to that, and you can mentally picture the amount of wetlands lost since the Revolutionary War.

In cold, hard, economic terms, each acre of wetland is worth 58 times more money than an acre of ocean in the benefits it provides, according to *Science*. Wetlands act like sponges: The porous, jet-black peat helps soak up heavy rains and melting snow that otherwise may flood suburban yards. They also function like kidneys, filtering out dirt, pesticides, and fertilizers before the unwanted runoff reaches lakes and streams. Without wetlands, excessive sediment can smother fish-spawning areas and fertilizers can kill the prized fish sought by anglers.

Some of these soggy lands also serve as broad water-storage areas, allowing

people to later enjoy these waters for iced tea and showers. And wetlands are a smorgasbord for frogs and migratory birds, and home to America's ducks. According to the National Audubon Society, wetlands compare to tropical rainforests in the diversity of species they support.

Yet which is more valuable to humans? According to *Science*, an acre of tropical forest is worth \$817 for its ecosystem benefits. An acre of open ocean is worth \$103. An acre of wetlands: \$6,017.

Yet they continue to vanish.

Permit Panacea?

RIGHT NOW, Vice President Al Gore's office is fielding phone calls from concerned environmentalists and wildlife lovers who hope he will stave off "the biggest challenge to wetlands protection," says Robin Mann, an outraged member of the Sierra Club's Wetlands and Clean Water Campaign Steering Committee.

Shopping centers and riverfront homes conceivably could sprout up on soggy land without the usual requirements: notifying the public or asking for permission from the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers, the agency in charge of regulating the use or destruction of wetlands. The new "quick permits" would allow up to three acres of non-tidal wetlands to be developed or farmed, and up to 10 acres of any non-tidal wetlands to be destroyed as part of a "master planned development," notes Julie Sibbing, assistant director for wetlands and wildlife refuge policy at the National Audubon Society.

In some cases, a builder wouldn't have to notify the Corps at all. And the traditional requirement that wetlands be avoided where possible wouldn't apply—a crucial failing, say environmentalists and wildlife specialists. Don't like what's being built next door? Sorry. No public input would be allowed either, Sibbing adds.

Ironically, these "rubber-stamp permits," as Clean Water Network's Kathy Nemsick calls them, are meant to quell public outcry, not rekindle it. They would replace the controversial and apparently more protective Nationwide Permit 26, which allows up to three acres of isolated or headwater wetlands to be destroyed. The Corps has promised to ditch the more stringent permit by year's end.