

Deserving of \$5 million

STATE GRANTS TO FUND COUNTY WATER TREATMENT, HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECTS

By BLEYS W. ROSE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat Denise Cadman, a natural resource specialist with Santa Rosa, on Wednesday watches a flock of birds fly over the Kelly Farm west of Santa Rosa. A state grant will pump \$1 million into wetland restoration at the 400-acre farm, which will become a model for preservation of the tiger salamander and endangered plants.

Sonoma County's funding-starved projects such as endangered plant and tiger salamander habitat preservation, as well as sewage treatment in Monte Rio and Graton, will get a chunk of nearly \$5.3 million in state money.

Our projects are ranked right up there at the top, which means they've been thoroughly reviewed for benefiting environmental restoration, water quality and fisheries," said Jake Mackenzie, the Rohnert Park councilman who served as vice chairman of a panel that scrutinized 123 North Coast projects.

Money, available for the first time from the state's new Integrated Regional Water Management grant program, will:

Allow completion of the Monte Rio wastewater treatment plant, which will get about 600 residents off their faulty septic systems. The state is contributing \$3.4 million of the \$16 million project.

Fund \$650,000 in improvements to Graton's waste treatment system.

Provide more than \$210,000 to help agricultural landowners develop water conservation and habitat preservation methods, with much of the effort targeted for Sonoma and Mendocino counties.

Put \$1 million into habitat restoration efforts on 70 acres of the 400-acre Kelly Farm property near the Laguna de Santa Rosa so that it can become a centerpiece of preservation of the tiger salamander and endangered plants such as the Sebastopol

meadowfoam, Burke's goldfield and Sonoma sunshine.

"Finally, we are getting to the real issue of what is the best use of this area," said Miles Ferris, utilities director for Santa Rosa, which supervises the Kelly Farm property.

"It deepens the area for tiger salamanders and it sets up the banks for the endangered plants."

Santa Rosa and Sonoma County officials said they were part of a coordinated effort among seven counties from Modoc to Del Norte to Sonoma that reviewed water-related projects and applied for funds from Proposition 50, the resources bond approved by voters in 2004. Together, the counties are slated to receive \$25 million.

Officials with the Sonoma County Water Agency, which coordinated the three-year project review process, said it put the North Coast in a good position to seek funding from Proposition 84 approved last week by California voters.

"Getting together to say what are the highest priorities in our region goes a long way in Sacramento when we can point to multiple benefits of projects like habitat restoration, water supply improvements and species preservation," said Lisa Renton, the Water Agency's government affairs specialist.

The biggest immediate impact of Proposition 50 funding will be in Monte Rio, where county planning and Water Agency officials have been struggling with a community divided over whether treatment facilities should supplant private septic systems.

"Getting 600 residents off of old, substandard septic systems and putting them on main sewers and a treatment plant will help them, not to mention anybody who uses the Russian River," said DeWayne Starnes, deputy director of the county's Permit and Resource Management Department. "We have been chasing funding for eight years."

Starnes said bids on the project will be sought in the spring and construction could begin next summer.