

Laguna restoration blueprint OK'd

Wetland management plan balances public access with preserving sensitive habitat

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Plans for restoring the Laguna de Santa Rosa were approved Tuesday by Sonoma County supervisors, lending weight to future efforts to actually get funding for projects.

The wetland management plan was two years in the making and acknowledges considerable public pressure for easy access to the watershed that spans 254 square miles from Cotati to Forestville, said Joseph Honton, management plan project manager of the Laguna's preservation foundation.

"But it needs to be tempered by the fact that there is some sensitive habitat that should remain closed," Honton said in handing a two-volume plan to supervisors. "We do have a problem with illegal camping and illicit activities in those areas."

Honton said docent-led tours likely will be the way most people get to experience the Laguna off a yet-to-be-established trail system.

The Laguna serves as a giant catch basin during Russian River flooding for water that urban areas of Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and Petaluma can't handle. It is also regarded as biologically important for plants, birds and waterfowl.

"We need to focus as much attention as we can on the Laguna," said west county Supervisor Mike Reilly. "It (the Laguna management plan) gives us a base line of conditions out there for our future restoration efforts."

The full report is available on the Laguna's Web site, www.lagunadesantarosa.org, under the "restoration" feature. It calls for splitting the Laguna into 18 mini ecosystems and developing different restoration plans for each one.

Dan Schurman, the Laguna foundation's executive director, said the group will likely return to county supervisors with funding requests for specific restoration projects.

"This raises the stature of the Laguna," Schurman said, for pursuit of federal, state,

county and nonprofit funding.

Just two weeks ago, the state Coastal Conservancy Board approved a \$500,000 grant for beginning two sections of Laguna trail. One will be 1.8 miles on the Kelly Farm, and the other will be a 0.6-mile segment on the Balletto property. Construction is to begin this year.

In November, the foundation broke ground on a Laguna Learning Center that will serve as an interpretive and educational facility for exploring the environmental resources and American Indian and agricultural history.

Conversion of the old Stone Farm house on Occidental Road will result in a \$6million facility that features an exhibit hall, a classroom and outdoor interpretive exhibits.