

Hidden jewel

Charting the future of the vast wetland has implications from livestock and flood control to recreation and restoration

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The second-largest freshwater wetland in Northern California is hidden in the fields of west Sonoma County, gaining attention only when nature forces people to deal with its eccentricities.

Although 254 miles square, the Laguna de Santa Rosa is almost invisible, save for the times when it closes highways during flooding, catches leaking sewage from the Santa Rosa treatment plant or turns out to be infested with some madly invasive weed.

Long considered an environmental treasure, the waterway running from Cotati to Forestville is getting new attention as the experts struggle to figure out how best to put it on display.

"The public perception of the area as a wetlands jewel has resulted in a widespread outpouring of public sentiment in support of its protection and restoration," says the recently completed management plan issued by the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "But a deeper look at the wetlands reveals a long list of ecological imbalances that portend a darker future."

In times of Russian River flooding, the Laguna operates like a giant bathtub as it accepts water backing up from Windsor and Mark West Creek and prevents catastrophe in the lower Russian River Valley.

But with planning and money, the Laguna could support a network of trails for "passive recreation" like hiking, bird-watching and picnicking. Biking and horseback riding through the Laguna, and kayaking and canoeing in its waters, are also viewed as possible.

Renewed focus on the Laguna comes as scientists, environmentalists and community groups convene a conference this week designed to chart future restoration efforts. It will be the first time in 18 years that so many groups with a stake in the Laguna have come together.

Already, scientists are discovering new threats to the Laguna. They include European slugs, automobile exhaust and a new weed, *Glyceria declinata*, increasingly found in Northern California vernal pools. Likewise, they are scratching their heads over new discoveries of species, definitely non-native to the Laguna.

Egrets, herons appear

For example, as crews worked to remove the waterway-choking *Ludwigia* plant, they were astounded to see swarms of egrets and herons descend on marshes freshly denuded

of the water weed.

Researchers from UC Davis found Louisiana crayfish had been thriving amidst the mass of invasive *Ludwigia*.

"Crayfish may have been introduced in the last century by the restaurant industry, some got loose and they've been in the Laguna quite a while," said foundation research director Christina Sloop. Researchers discovered that the shellfish had found a home after the *Ludwigia* was cleared out and egrets and herons swooped in for a feeding frenzy. Sloop said the *Glyceria declinata* plant is a non-native species that "just came on the radar."

Also known as Eurasian waxy manna grass or sweet grass, the grass-like plant that grows long and sparse and spreads sideways "might become a competitor to our endangered plants," Sloop said.

Endangered species habitat

Like a giant petri dish, the Laguna is cultivating all manner of organisms, including endangered species such as the tiger salamander and three types of plants.

As a treasure chest of wildlife and plant life, the Laguna is the focus of political and environmental scrutiny. City and county officials, along with environmentalists and construction industry officials, are crafting a building permit process in which mitigation programs play a major role.

New studies to be presented at this week's conference will also highlight revised thinking about restoration. For example, at the 1989 conference, farmers whose lands border the Laguna were on the defensive against charges that livestock runoff pollutes the wetland. This time, scientists are prepared to demonstrate how livestock and sheep could help restoration by feeding on invasive plants.

Mark Green, foundation associate executive director, said the 1989 conference, attended by about 200 people, was instrumental in bringing together environmentalists, scientists and community groups keen on saving the Laguna. This year, sponsors anticipate more than 250 will register for the event, which runs Thursday through Sunday at Sonoma State University.

The Laguna Foundation was formed as a result of the 1989 conference and it remained an all-volunteer group until 2002, when it evolved into a nonprofit with funding, employees and programs.

Broadening goals

"It is time to go beyond the Laguna's stakeholders' interests and to roll this out to the community as a waterway that we depend upon for agriculture, flood control and recreation that merits restoration," Green said.