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EDITORIALS

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Laguna dreams

What could be a great natural resource remains mired in politics, bureaucracy

The Laguna de Santa Rosa may be the least-known and least-appreciated of all of this region's natural wonders.

As it meanders the 10 miles from Rohnert Park to the Russian River, this broad ribbon of water and wetlands, grasslands and trees serves as home to 286 plant species, 230 bird species, 25 mammal species, seven amphibian species and nine reptile species. Thousands of waterfowl, following the Pacific Flyway, visit each year.

The Laguna is beautiful, too — but not as beautiful, or as biologically rich, as it once was. That was before wetlands were drained for farming and urban development.

A century ago, the area of the Laguna was perhaps

twice as large. Old photos show Sunday-afternoon boaters plying lakes as much as a mile wide. Hikers and birdwatchers and fishermen all found places for recreation or for solitude.

In 1990, legislation to create a Laguna de Santa Rosa national wildlife refuge passed the House of Representatives.

Then-Democratic Congressman Douglas Bosco and the late Robert Sharp, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist, envisioned a large and permanent public resource. Wetlands would be restored. Ecological diversity would flourish. Public recreation uses would be encouraged.

The legislation proposed a 9,000-acre refuge and a \$20 million appropriation — a substantial sum in 1990 — to purchase land from willing sellers.

Sharp, who died last year at age 85, was founder of the West Sonoma County

Rural Alliance and the group's president for 17 years. He was also president emeritus of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation and is widely credited for leading efforts to prevent further damage to the wetlands.

Unfortunately, his idea of a comprehensive plan for the Laguna died when Bosco was defeated for re-election.

A succession of new members of Congress, including Republican Frank Riggs and Democrat Lynn Woolsey,

would profess interest, but nothing happened.

Familiar story: The idea would become caught in the crossfire of other political battles, the competition among various government bureaucracies and the difficulties in acquiring the money necessary to do

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something important.

This week, officials and interest groups will talk about spending \$3.4 million to study the impacts of erosion on the Laguna and its capacity to reduce flooding along the Russian River.

If the study can identify practical ways to to curb erosion and flooding, the money will be well-spent.

But the proposal remains part of the same piecemeal approach that occupies so much of our time and attention — and blind us to bigger and grander possibilities.

Why can't the Laguna de Santa Rosa be made a natural wonderland again?

It can — if we can overcome petty political rivalries, bureaucratic infighting and short-term ambitions.

If enough of us shared the dream, it would be easy to create a natural showplace that would be the community's pride forever, or even longer than that.