

Proposed county mitigation policy may save valuable wetlands

By Diane Peterson

Second of two parts

From the mid-50s to the mid-70s, the annual wetland losses in the United States averaged 458,000 acres.

Over half of the 215 million wetland acres that once existed in the United States have now disappeared.

This loss of wetlands is so critical, that last March then-Interior Secretary James Watt told Congress the continued destruction of these areas poses "a serious threat" to the nation's "environmental and economic well-being."

Although not known for his environmental sensitivity, Watt proposed a bill to Congress that would "prohibit the use of federal tax dollars . . . to subsidize drainage and development of critical wetlands."

While the federal government is making more money available for wetlands conservation, local environmentalists have also been work-

ing to conserve the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the second most important riparian marshland in the state.

Richard Lehtinen, chief of the environmental resources section of the county planning department, has been instrumental in pushing for a county off-site mitigation policy for threatened areas like the laguna.

Broadly, the policy would require off-site mitigation for any proposed project that is found during its environmental review to have unavoidable adverse impacts.

Still in its nascent stage, the off-site mitigation policy met with considerable controversy and an unreceptive planning commission in August. Last month, however, the board of supervisors heard the planning department's recommendations and were more receptive.

Currently, Lehtinen said the supervisors are leaning toward adoption of such a policy and have appointed supervisors Bob Adams and Helen Rudee to formulate the policy.

Lehtinen described the policy as an attempt to make people "more conscious about lands that should be preserved" and to "focus attention on the importance of habitat lands."

He said the planning department would like to make a prioritized list of highly threatened sites in advance.

Lehtinen said there are "a lot of possibilities" for management of off-site mitigation. For example, if a wildlife habitat were to be destroyed by a project, a similar habitat nearby could be chosen for preservation.

The off-site mitigation policy would work through a fund, whereby monies could be used to either acquire properties or to purchase a conservation easement for properties. The latter would be more cost-effective for the county, Lehtinen noted.

Lehtinen said that "controversy erupted early" on the policy from various groups. Environmentalists, for example, feared the policy could be used as an excuse to

"approve bad projects."

In reply to these fears, Lehtinen pointed out that the off-site mitigation would be only a "last resort," and that consideration of on-site mitigation or a change of site would come first.

The construction industry, on the other hand, was concerned that the policy would be another bureaucratic hoop to jump through that would delay their projects.

However, Lehtinen claims that through a referral service, environmental impacts could be evaluated early in the process, preventing unnecessary delays.

Moreover, to allay the fears of the farming industry, Lehtinen pointed out that the lands that would be eligible for off-site mitigation money are marshy, habitat lands that are not good grazing and not "terribly useful for anything."

In general, the off-site mitigation policy is strongly supported by environmentalists. Joan Vilms executive director of the Sonoma

(See Laguna . . . , Page 12)

Land Trust, said the policy is "long overdue."

"The concept of permanent protection for permanent damage makes sense," she said.

As a professional consultant for both the Sonoma and Napa Land Trusts, Vilms is working directly with landowners to purchase either acreages or conservation restrictions (the forfeiture of development and use rights).

Although the land trust is soliciting both gifts and "bargain sites," Vilms emphasized that the program is "voluntary." "We are not trying to take anything away without compensation," she added.

Currently, the Land Trust is using money it received from the State Department of Water Resources for off-site mitigation of a power plant in the Geysers project.

The three areas of priority identified by the Sonoma Land Trust for preservation are the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the Pitkin March located near Vine Hill and Guerneville roads, and the Estero Americano.

Those who are interested in selling their land or conservation restrictions for less than market value to the Land Trust can use it as an income tax write-off, Vilms said.

"We are interested primarily in existing wetland habitat identified by the Fish and Game," she said. "We're not interested in agricultural land unless the farmers make the approach."

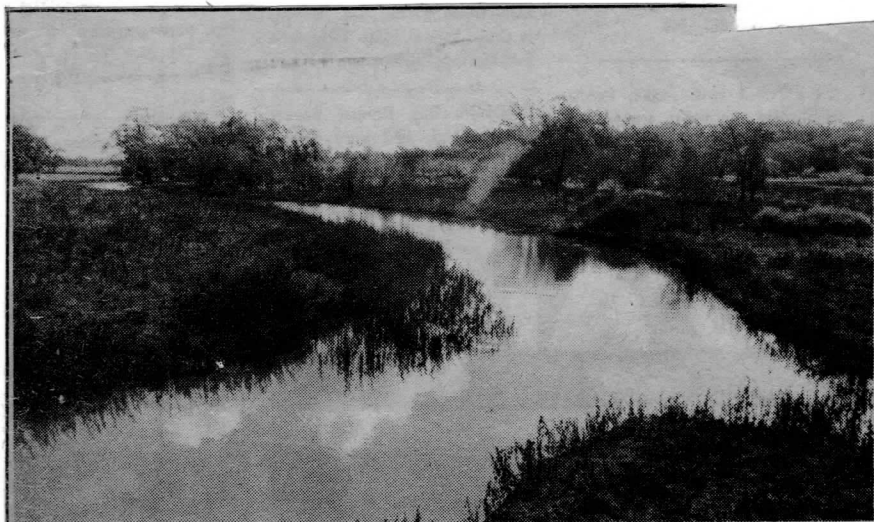
So far, Vilms said she has been encouraged by landowner's attitudes toward the laguna, which is the focus of the Land Trust's efforts.

"People really love the laguna," she said. "They come to know it and are aware of seasonal changes."

Much of the laguna is thick, muddy vegetation which is inhospitable to humans," Vilms said. Because of the poison oak, she has encountered landowners with several acres of marsh that they have never even visited.

As a priority, Vilms envisions the future laguna as a habitat for plant and animal life. "I want it to be healthy and vital so the chain of life continues and enriches itself, not terminates and dies," she said.

Laguna...



LET IT FLOW—After this week's rain, the Laguna de Santa Rosa at Occidental Road deepens like a lake as it absorbs flood water from the Russian River. Several local groups, including the county planning department and the Sonoma Land Trust, are trying to help preserve the laguna as a natural habitat for wildlife and plants in the face of mounting pressures from development, city sewage plants and agricultural channelization.

TIMES photo by Diane Peterson

However, she also envisions some human uses in areas that are more open. One possible area for public access is at the bridges on Occidental Road, where some fishing already takes place," she said.

Also, the area of the laguna along the soon-to-be-abandoned railroad tracks east of Sebastopol could be enhanced for mixed wildlife and human use, Vilms said.

With resource lands becoming more and more rare and pressures for development becoming more and more intense, Bill Cox of the State Fish and Game Department noted that the time to acquire lands for public access to the laguna is now.

While he sees little possibility for a state park on the laguna, he would like to see the laguna developed into an area like the Golden Gate Recreation Area in Marin County.

This type of plan would allow the National Parks to draw a line

for a park border, then gradually purchase the parcels to add to a park, Cox said.

The advantage of this plan, he noted, is that people are not displaced. The lands are leased back to the owners, who receive money for it and continue to farm it, but no longer have to pay property taxes.

At the same time, it allows the National Parks to have control over the stock density, Cox said.

Lehtinen of the county planning department noted that this plan might take 10 years to bring to fruition, since it entails financial dealings with many, separate property-owners.

However, "possibilities emerge if you want them to," he added optimistically.

At present, 'about 8.2 million wetland acres in the United States are under federal or state protection. The remaining 86.2 million acres are in private ownership.