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Laguna Report: a minority view

While most of the west county's environmentalists have embraced efforts to use Santa Rosa wastewater to "enhance" wildlife habitats in the Laguna de Santa Rosa, Brenda Adelman remains skeptical.

According to Adelman, Laguna preservation efforts may in the end ensure that Santa Rosa keeps using the Russian River as its major winter disposal route.

Adelman is the current chair of the Sonoma branch of the Sierra Club and chief spokesperson for the Russian River Sewer Committee, a clean water watchdog group that grew out of Guerneville's own sewer problems in the early 80's, which now keeps a tight watch on Santa Rosa. She is consistently in attendance at sewer-related meetings of the Santa Rosa City Council, the Water Quality Control Board, and the Board of Supervisors. Other environmentalists appreciate her file digging, but are known to complain about how difficult, if not impossible, it is to reach a consensus on some issues with her.

Adelman says that she is concerned

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that efforts to preserve the Laguna have been spread out between several different groups (the original Sebastopol Laguna Committee, the ad hoc county committee, and Rep. Doug Bosco's Technical Advisory Committee), and no one "knows the big picture" — no one except Bosco and Santa Rosa City Manager Ken Blackman, that is, she claims. Why Blackman? Because Santa Rosa officials are present at all the meetings, she answers.

"I want to save the Laguna," says Adelman. "But I don't want to do it using wastewater. I believe that Bosco sees that Santa Rosa has a real problem, and sees the Laguna as a way to solve that problem."

Adelman thinks that the Estero de Americano plan currently favored by Santa Rosa may not fly because of opposition from Marin. (She has serious reservations about that plan too.) If that fails, then Santa Rosa may seriously return to River disposal, she believes.

Adelman's theories are backed by some troubling facts. First, the City of Santa Rosa is presently conducting experiments on a pilot "overland flow" field. Treated wastewater is run over a heavily vegetated slope in order to "polish" the product. The

fear is that the city would attempt to use the process as an indirect discharge, thus escaping state restrictions on volumes of wastewater released into the river. In 1986 Santa Rosa consultants attempted to get approval from state health for overland flow, but were denied it.

Secondly, the Laguna report talks about wastewater being used as to enhance the Laguna in the summer months. That could mean that, contrary to present state regulations, wastewater from the Laguna could be released into the Russian River at the height of the sewer season.

According to Bob Sharp, chairman of the Bosco committee, it may be that new discharges to the Russian River — which would probably be small — may be acceptable because of the cleanliness of the filtered wastewater. Or, said Sharp, it may be that in the summer, wastewater would be re-circulated through the Laguna, and not released to the River.

In any case, Adelman wants some assurances that the Laguna will not reopen the River as an option. She says she is going to circulate a petition asking that measures that would limit effluent discharges, mandate conservation, and protect downstream residents from flooding be agreed upon before a Laguna Wildlife Refuge is created.

—TOM ROTH