

Politics feed vernal pools issue

By EILEEN KLINEMAN
Staff Writer

Some believe it's a tempest in a mud puddle, while others see the sudden concern over vernal pools as a long-overdue recognition of an important natural resource.

Nature-lovers describe these seasonal wetlands as beautiful and rare remnants of native Sonoma County geography.

These wintertime pools that turn into springtime wildflower patches became a political issue when the federal government took a high-profile leap into the business of preserving wetlands.

Many developers and bureaucrats are crying "foul" because Uncle Sam steps in to halt projects when vernal pools are found on a site — even if all local agencies have already given their approval.

They accuse environmentalists of trying to halt developments over mere mud puddles.

But plant and wildlife experts are trying to convince critics that these are very special puddles — as biologically diverse as coastal tide pools and as critical to the ecology of the planet as tropical rain forests.

Present only in California and a few places overseas with similar Mediterranean climates, vernal pools are found in the undeveloped swatches of the Santa Rosa plain.

Those who want to see them preserved are invoking strong federal policies that demand no further loss of the nation's wetlands.

First into the fray for the vernal pools was the Army Corps of Engineers, an agency once known for dam-building and river-dredging that many consider a most unlikely candidate for the role of environmental protector.

Within the past year, the Corps has marched into Sonoma County on several projects, wreaking havoc with developers' peace of mind. Among them are:

- Eight proposed housing devel-

See Pools, Page B5