

Laguna preserve bill clears major hurdle

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by Andrew Jowers

Federal legislation to designate the Laguna de Santa Rosa a 9,000-acre national wildlife refuge has passed a major hurdle. The House Merchant Marines and Fisheries Committee on Friday unanimously approved the

\$20 million bill, clearing the way for both the House and the Senate to vote on the measure before Congress adjourns in about two weeks. "I think it's really exciting," said Sebastopol City Councilwoman Anne Magnite, who testified before the Merchant Ma-

rines and Fisheries Committee subcommittee in July. "It bows me over, in a way, to see this community and governmental effort culminate in an extraordinary resource for Sonoma County." The Laguna is one of the largest (Please see *Laguna* page A10)

Laguna. . .

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fresh-water marsh systems in the state, is home to a wide variety of fish, plant and animal species, and provides refuge and rest for migratory birds.

The House is expected to vote on the bill early next week, but, with Congress bogged down in budget-reduction negotiations, the Senate may not have time to consider the measure this year, said Joel Rogers, congressional assistant to Rep. Doug Bosco (D-

Sebastopol), sponsor of the bill. House and Senate versions of the bill are identical, and both California senators, Alan Cranston and Pete Wilson, have expressed an interest in moving the bill through the upper house. Sebastopol resident Robert Sharp, who chaired the Laguna technical advisory committee that helped draft the legislation, said he was "moderately optimistic" the bill will now become law. "But, as the old saying goes, it ain't over 'til it's over."

The proposal was stuck before

the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, the only committee it had to face, for several months. Although there was little opposition from legislators, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concerns delayed action. The agency objected to certain provisions over management of the refuge, and questioned whether other areas were more deserving of the protective refuge status.

"There was still the feeling that other lands have greater natural resource value," said Magnite.

The bill includes \$20 million to buy property in the Laguna now owned by Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, farmers and other private citizens, said Rogers.

National wildlife refuge status will "put the regulatory power and resources of the federal government behind management of the Laguna," he said. "The goal is to prevent development, and this will put one authority in charge."

Now, various government agencies and Sebastopol and Santa Rosa "all have a finger in the pie," said Rogers.