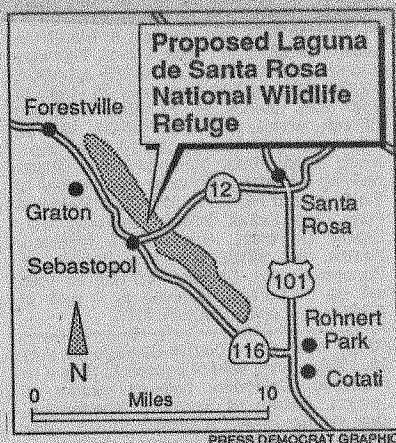


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Laguna effort may face new roadblocks

By EILEEN KLINEMAN
Staff Writer

With a hearing scheduled next week in Washington, D.C., on the proposed Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge, Sebastopol city officials and environmentalists have visions of a Sonoma County natural resource on a par with San Francisco's Golden Gate Recreation Area or Marin's Audubon Canyon Ranch.

But they may not enjoy the easy ride originally expected for the congressional bill creating the \$20 million preserve, sponsored by U.S.

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Rep. Doug Bosco, D-Occidental.

Laguna protectionists have been working for months on differences with local farmers and Russian River sewer activists, but now they're expecting some dissension from the federal agency that would oversee the preserve, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The rumblings we've heard is that they (fish and wildlife officials) are disposed against the refuge because of higher priorities," said Bosco.

Backed by the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society and a grass-roots organization of Laguna de Santa Rosa nature lovers, Sebastopol council member Ann Magnie and Laguna Advisory Committee chairman Robert Sharp will testify Tuesday before the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee's subcommittee on Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation about the value of preserving the 9,000-acre area.

Sharp, a biologist who is a retired staff member of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said he hopes his former colleagues will see the ecological value of the laguna. He said the area is a critical stop along the bird migratory route known as the Pacific Flyway and a life support system for several endangered species of plants and birds.

Magnie said the city of Sebastopol sees the refuge not only as an environmental asset, but a civic asset as well.

"It will put Sebastopol on the map. It will add to the prestige of the

area," she said. The city's eastern border follows the laguna.

Bosco said he is optimistic about the proposal, and hopes his Republican lobbying will work.

"I really hope we can get this through. I think that the laguna is one of the most valuable ecosystems we have, and it's a hidden one, even to the people who live next to it," he said.

Plans for the preserve began with efforts by a Sebastopol organization worried about the dwindling wetland habitat for 230 bird, 25 mammal, 19 fish, seven amphibian and nine reptile species.

The proposal to buy up acreage within the laguna's flood plain and open it to nature hikes won resounding popular support.

Already, the laguna is receiving attention from nature enthusiasts ranging from Sonoma State University graduate students to younger nature explorers organized by schools and non-profit organizations, including the Terwilliger Nature Education Foundation in Marin County.

But there are those locally who have cast a wary eye toward the proposed \$20 million project. Among them are the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, which historically has battled any public takeover of private property, and the River Citizens Sewer Committee, which jumps into any issue that potentially touches on Santa Rosa's Llano Treatment Plant.

Brenda Adelman of the Russian River group has bucked the local chapter of the Sierra Club and other

environmental organizations by writing letters critical of the refuge to Washington and requesting that any plan contain specific guidelines restricting the flood plain's use for wastewater. A rift in the environmental community occurred when Sharp's committee suggested the lagoon could benefit from an infusion of highly treated wastewater during certain times of year.

Len Swenson, conservation chair of the Sierra Club's Redwood Empire Chapter, said Adelman's views put her in the minority among the environmental community.

"The Sierra Club is strongly in favor of this," he said.

As a result of concerns from the farm bureau, only about 3,000 of the 6,000 acres of private land originally targeted would be purchased. About 3,000 acres already are in public ownership, according to Joel Rogers, an aide to Bosco.