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A chance to save a local treasure

As Sonoma County becomes more urban, its remaining unspoiled rural areas become more valuable. And, as our environmental awareness increases, we realize that resources we once took for granted are priceless and irreplaceable.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa, a wetland area located in south central Sonoma County, is an ideal local example. It was when the laguna was threatened by encroaching development — and the pollution problems that inevitably result — that the alarms were widely heard about the need for protection.

Fortunately, the alarms were not too late. Tuesday, a congressional hearing will study the merits of establishing the Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge, as proposed by U.S. Rep. Doug Bosco. It is a vital step toward preserving a unique part of our natural heritage.

Sponsors of the refuge hope to acquire about 6,000 acres within the laguna from willing sellers. Another 3,000 acres within the wildlife refuge boundary would be owned either by other public agencies or by private individuals. Total cost of the preserve is estimated at \$20 million.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game would oversee management of the laguna, taking over for the 20 or more agencies from various levels of government that now share responsibility.

Supporters of the laguna measure have several goals for its management:

- Protect, restore and enhance habitat for fish, migrating birds and other native plant and animal species in the habitat. Two endangered bird species, the endangered California freshwater shrimp and five endangered plant species are found in the laguna.

- Protect archaeological and historical sites. The laguna long was home to the Pomo Indians.

- Provide for public uses, including education programs.

- Oversee enforcement of existing environmental regulations.

The laguna measure is endorsed by the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society and the environmentalists who have been most closely involved with the fight to preserve this local treasure.

Let's hope those voices aren't ignored in Tuesday's hearing in Washington.