

11-10  
**Dredging up old fears**

BY SARA PEYTON

**R**ussian River environmental activists, angry over a federal proposal to compensate for wetlands and wildlife habitat loss from the construction of Warm Springs Dam by restoring a portion of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, have accused federal engineers of joining forces with Santa Rosa officials to send treated wastewater downriver.

But environmental planners with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Sacramento office, who say they are only in the early planning stages of a decade-old riparian habitat mitigation project, are dumbfounded by misconceptions surrounding their proposal to restore up to 1000 acres in the Laguna. Instead, they insist, Corps planners are only in the information-gathering stage of a project that may not be funded by Congress until 1994, if at all.

Meanwhile Santa Rosa city officials along with members of the Laguna Foundation, a non-profit group seeking to preserve and restore the second largest freshwater wetlands in Northern California, say they resent being accused of conspiracy and lying by Russian River activists. And they contend it would be impossible for Santa Rosa officials to sneak a solution to their effluent problems into the Corps proposal without public input.

At issue is the completion of a riparian mitigation project required by the 1976 Environmental Impact Statement for Warm Springs Dam. According to Dick Eng, assistant chief of the planning division for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Sacramento, the final EIS was approved without the mitigation requirement. "But a couple of years later the Fish and Wildlife Service wrote us and told us we needed to mitigate. We feel it's a worthwhile thing to do."

Initially the Corps hoped to restore wetlands and riparian habitat along Dry Creek near Healdsburg. But the land was too costly and there were few property owners willing to sell their premium grape-growing land. Corps officials abandoned the Dry Creek site and the mitigation project was deferred for many years because of budget cutbacks.

Now they are eyeing the Laguna de Santa Rosa, an approximately 9000-acre wetlands area between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, with preliminary plans to restore up to 1000 acres of property if they can find willing sellers. Corps environmental planners have also planned a field trip to the Russian River in mid-May to check out alternative mitigation sites. By August the Corps plans to hold public hearings in the Santa Rosa area on the mitigation project.

According to Deborah Jerome, the environmental plan-

ner who is working on the preliminary Laguna plan, the Corps is considering restoring up to 1000 acres of oak woodlands, vernal pools, and riparian habitat.

"We're going to be looking at the cheapest alternatives and not open marshes," Jerome said, adding that open marshes generally require "higher maintenance and cost more."

On March 8 Rep. Frank Riggs (R-Windsor) sent a letter to the Corps in support of the Laguna restoration project.

"The widespread support for restoration of the Laguna is reflected by the interest of local environmental groups, elected officials in surrounding municipalities, and local, state, and federal agencies," Riggs wrote, in the letter that also outlines several areas of concern. "Care should be taken that discharges of wastewater not endanger the Laguna's role in downriver flood control and that wastewater releases from the Laguna to the Russian River do not exceed regulatory standards and requirements."

Riggs also supports allocation of federal monies for a \$2



**RIVER ACTIVIST** Brenda Adelman: "The fact is that this is a wastewater plan."

million Russian River study authorized by Congress in the late '80s but never funded.

But along the Russian River, activists are viewing with suspicion efforts to restore the Laguna. The chambers of commerce in Guerneville, Monte Rio, and Forestville are considering opposing plans to restore a portion of the Laguna with federal funds. Instead they want the mitigation project in the Russian River.

"I'm encouraged that the Corps is expanding its view of where money can be spent," said Lynn Crescione, president of the Russian River Chamber of Commerce, who plans to attend the mid-May field trip to the Russian River with Corps engineers. "Sportsmen, fishermen, and longtime Russian River environmentalists say that Warm Springs Dam has had a noticeable negative effect on the River."

The Russian River chamber has proposed the immediate formation of an ad hoc committee made up of River-area chamber members and other interested parties to develop a proposal for an alternative Corps mitigation project for the River. They plan to contact chambers in Windsor, Healdsburg, Cloverdale, Hopland, and Ukiah, Crescione said.

Fears that the Laguna proposal may be environmentally unsound for the Russian River and a cover for a new Santa Rosa sewage treatment solution are largely being fueled by allegations made by Guerneville resident Brenda Adelman.

"The fact is that this is a wastewater plan," declared Adelman, who is the chairperson for the River Citizens Sewer Committee, about the Corps' proposed restoration project in the Laguna, and she added that Santa Rosa officials want "to buy property in the Laguna and fill it with wastewater."

"Maybe it will be great for wildlife but everyone else will suffer," she warned. Adelman said she intends "to stop it early on in the process. Basically, I feel strongly that this money was intended for use on the Russian River. There are problems with the Laguna project that haven't been addressed."

Adelman, who has accused Santa Rosa officials of "lying," said a recent letter, dated March 12 and submitted to the Corps by Miles Ferris, director of utilities in Santa Rosa and one of 15 directors on the Laguna Foundation, proves her contention that the city of Santa Rosa plans to fill the Laguna with wastewater. The letter supporting the Corps proposal points out that Santa Rosa is currently irrigating about 5000 acres of farmland in the Laguna and requests the Corps "consider this in your plan."

According to Adelman, Santa Rosa wants "to get money to buy properties in the Laguna and then they will come along and say we will manage it for you."

Ferris, who noted that he'd stopped counting the number

SEE DREDGING UP OLD FEARS, PAGE 12

# Dredging up old fears

91-10

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

of conspiracies he's been accused of, said he would be disappointed if the Laguna mitigation project under consideration by the Corps isn't approved, but added if the Russian River is chosen instead, "that's fine too."

Natural resources consultant John Cummings, who wrote the draft letter for the Santa Rosa Utilities District to the Corps, adamantly denied Adelman's interpretation of it. "I know of no way that marshes in the Laguna will solve or deal with Santa Rosa's long-term effluent disposal problem. And any deviation from the current operating permit from the Regional Water Quality Control Board would require extensive review that would take not less than two to three years." Currently, Santa Rosa's operating permit specifically prohibits summer discharges of treated wastewater into the Russian River.

Whether a current Santa Rosa proposal calling for a 600-acre wetlands and riparian-habitat restoration project using reclaimed treated wastewater is ever built in the Laguna depends on the environmental review process and the Santa Rosa City Council and is independent of the Army Corps proposal, Cummings added.

Water from the Kelley Farm wetlands, a Santa Rosa sewage treatment demonstration project, is now circulated and doesn't commingle with Russian River waters. The Laguna channel runs into Mark West Creek, which flows into the Russian River near Forestville.

Cummings, who is also a director of the Laguna Foundation, said the group's board is a diverse organization that includes dairy farmers, community and environmental activists, and Sebastopol and Santa Rosa city officials. "All I can say is that we have been brought together by our commitment to preserve the Laguna."

One problem facing environmentalists seeking to protect the Laguna is the need for a reliable water source to restore the wetlands' riparian and wildlife habitat. Some are beginning to view reclaimed water from Santa Rosa sewage treatment plant as a viable water resource for the Laguna de Santa Rosa. Historically the Laguna was wet year round, but in the early 1900s it was dredged and drained in summer months to make way for farming.

Given sewage treatment advances, some experts believe that one leaky septic tank draining into the Russian River is more environmentally damaging than any amount of treated wastewater added to the River. In San Jose, plans are under way to reclaim wastewater and return it to the city's drinking supply.

"The Laguna is a significant wildlife area the likes of which no longer exists," said Joan Vilms, acquisitions consultant for the Sonoma Land Trust. "I respect Brenda Adelman. But are her conclusions correct or are they based on unfounded fears? In my view, the Santa Rosa sewage problem can be solved if we look at the treated wastewater as a resource and sell it."

But in Guerneville, memories of the 1985 Santa Rosa

sewage spill into the Russian River, followed by disastrous business losses when summer tourists stayed away from the recreation area, still linger. In the May Russian River of Chamber of Commerce newsletter, an ad hoc committee of members advised against supporting the proposed Laguna restoration project by the Corps. "If [Laguna restoration with River of much-needed monies for much-needed riparian habitat restoration. Most of us make a living, directly or indirectly, from an environmentally healthy river. Nobody, or so it seems, makes a living from a healthy Laguna."

Despite rumors that the Corps may be willing to spend anywhere from \$8 million to \$40 million on a restoration project in the Laguna, Dick Eng said his department has not budgeted any dollar amount for the mitigation of wetlands loss from the construction of Warm Springs Dam. There are no plans to submit a budget until after the project is approved by San Francisco headquarters, Eng explained.

If OK'd in San Francisco and proposed for the following year's Corps' budget, the project would require congressional approval. To win approval and not lose out to competing projects, it would likely have to be nudged by the district's congressman, Corps officials explained.

But before the Corps will submit a budget for the mitigation project to Congress, a letter of intent to participate must be received by a local sponsoring agency, in this case the Sonoma County Water Agency. The agency was the local sponsor for the construction of Warm Springs Dam.

Whether or not the water agency will need to come up with matching funds necessary to go ahead with the mitigation project (about 25 percent of the total cost) is still in the negotiation stage, explained Fifth District Supervisor Emile Carpenter.

"We don't have the money, and it may become a sticking point down the line," acknowledged Carpenter, because the contract language changed after 1986. But at this point both Eng and Carpenter agree that questions over how the project will be funded don't interfere with the initial planning stages.

"There is no plot to put the Santa Rosa sewer in the Laguna," added Carpenter. "There are equal numbers of people who want to restore the Laguna without regard to the Santa Rosa sewer."

The Corps plans to cooperate with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, California Fish and Game, Santa Rosa, and Sebastopol, all agencies with holdings in the Laguna, if it recommends a Laguna restoration project. "We look for public willingness, congressional support, and willing sellers on these type of projects," said Corps engineer Matthew Davis, adding that no matter what mitigation projects recommended by the Corps, it must have a local sponsor.

Army Corps environmental planners will examine the middle reach of the River between Healdsburg and Forestville on May 21. Plans call for a "field assessment" of the area in order to evaluate it both biologically and economically as a possible alternative site for the mitigation project.