

91.6

Shrunken laguna refuge proposed

By EILEEN KLINEMAN
Staff Writer

Rep. Frank Riggs has proposed a scaled-down alternative to a planned 9,000-acre wildlife refuge on the Laguna de Santa Rosa, saying the original plan could not win congressional approval.

Former Rep. Doug Bosco last year won House approval of a bill creating a Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge along the endangered waterway. The bill

“It’s a far more practical option at this time.”

REP. FRANK RIGGS

stalled in the Senate, and Riggs said Friday he believes federal budget problems will keep it from being revived this year.

As an alternative, Riggs is pursuing a new plan to purchase about 1,000 acres along the laguna.

“Albeit scaled down, it’s a far more practical option at this time,” said the Windsor Republican.

Riggs said he doesn’t believe the Bosco legislation would make it in the current economic climate.

“This year the Office of Management of Budget will report the highest annual budget deficit in history, \$300 to \$400 billion without Desert Shield or the savings and loan bailout. The chances of getting money for preservation and enhancement are very slim,” he said.

Riggs’ plan would fulfill the Corps of Engineers’ promise to compensate for environmental damage that was done to creeks and streams during the construction of Warm Springs Dam near Healdsburg.

A decade ago, the Corps outlined plans to do a restoration project along Dry Creek that involved buying vineyards and restoring them to a natural setting. Officials decided, however, that buying vineyards was too expensive, according to Fred Kindel, chief of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers environmental resources branch.

See Laguna, back page

91.6 B

Laguna

Continued from Page A1

Though required under federal environmental laws, the restoration project was neglected until this year when the Corps began looking for alternative places, he said.

A project along the Laguna de Santa Rosa was suggested by state and federal biologists, he said.

A Laguna protectionist who worked for years with Bosco on the wildlife refuge bill expressed disappointment that the original legislation is in limbo, though he's pleased that something is in the works.

"It cannot take the place of a 9,000-acre refuge, but if that's all we can get . . . it's a step in the right direction," said Bob Sharp, a retired fisheries biologist from Sebastopol who worked for four years toward the national refuge legislation.

Others have been critical of the new plan because they'd rather see restoration along the Russian River to revive the steelhead and salmon population. But Kindel said letters to his office have run 9-1 in favor of the 1,000-acre plan.

Laguna area ranchers are thrilled with the scaled-down proposal

because it offers more private property protection and because it takes in less acreage than Bosco's plan, according to Judy Van Winkle, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

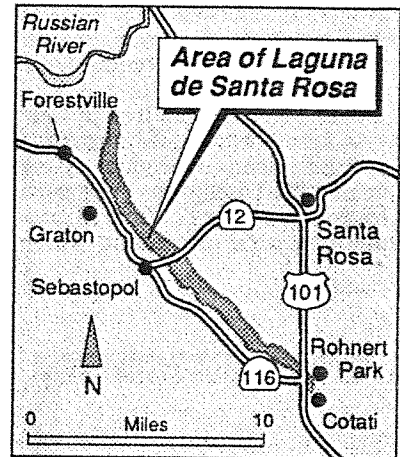
"What we've been trying to get is a lesser area and a 'willing seller' clause. The Farm Bureau would be ecstatic with this," Van Winkle said.

A "willing seller" clause would guarantee that the government would not force the sale of land for the refuge. The Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdiction over wetlands, has agreed to include the clause if it proceeds with the project.

Although a Corps-funded Laguna project has an edge because such a project was required as an original condition for building Warm Springs Dam, it too could be hampered by a tight federal budget.

Kindel said the Corps likely will hold hearings this summer in Sonoma County to determine if there is community support for the plan, then would spend six months preparing a proposal that would be funded, at the earliest, in 1993.

He said his best guess is that the project would encompass 1,000 acres or less, but he said he has no idea where the land would be or how much it would cost.



PRESS DEMOCRAT GRAPHIC

Riggs said he sees this as a beginning for the Laguna restoration. He said he has not ruled out reviving some form of the Bosco legislation if the Corps plan fails. He also believes that more land could be added to the initial project over the years.

Sebastopol City Council member Ann Magnie said she doesn't believe it matters whether it's a national refuge or, as under the Riggs plan, a restoration project under the state's management.

"It doesn't matter what they call it as long as protection and restoration are achieved," she said.