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New twist in disposal plans

Thirsty farms could keep effluent out of estero

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Staff Writer

Pushed by environmental groups and pulled by farmers, Santa Rosa is considering yet another proposal to dispose of its wastewater, one that would permit irrigation in the southern and western parts of the county and avoid the controversial Estero Americano.

That option is not discussed in the environmental impact report that goes before the City Council on Tuesday, but city engineers say the hearing is still important to make sure technical information is complete.

"We want to see what people are saying at the hearing, get some direction from council and then do any more work that is needed," Dave Richardson, a city consultant, said.

Santa Rosa is halfway through the process of developing a long-term system to dispose of its treated wastewater.

The process began in 1985, when the regional arm of the state water board fined the city for sewage spills and excess discharges into the Russian River.

The regional board also ordered the city to find another way to get rid of its wastewater and have that system operational by the end of 1995.

After four years, a few false starts and $3.5 million in studies, the city last month issued an environmental impact report on what it felt were the four best options for meeting the regional water board's demands.

These included an ocean outfall, irrigation and marsh restoration in either west or south county and discharge of highly treated wastewater into the Russian River. Costs range from $124 million to $169 million.

The west county option with an enormous storage reservoir, an intricate system of marsh restoration and extensive use of farmland for irrigation has been the city's first choice and gets the closest scrutiny.

A public hearing on the report is set for 2 p.m. Tuesday before the City Council. The council must find that the report addresses all environmental concerns before it can select a project to be built.

But the ink on the report was scarcely dry before city engineers had second thoughts.

"We had farmers that wanted the water and we were still hearing concerns from NOAA (a federal agency) about the estero that, right or wrong, could tie up the project. We needed to look at other ways of using that water," said Dan Carlson, project coordinator in the city Utilities Department.

The idea of a south county-west county combination has been talked about before. But this time, the city is taking it seriously.

"The focus is changing as a result of the release of the document," said Ben Kor, executive officer with the North Coast regional water board. "It's the way the process should work."

The west county option, with its irrigation and marsh reclamation, allows up to 1.7 million gallons a year of wastewater to filter through wetlands into the Estero Americano, a waterway that leads to the ocean and is part of the National Marine Sanctuary at the Gulf of the Farallones.

Environmentalists and the federal agency which oversees the sanctuary say the fragile estero cannot tolerate the influx of wastewater and they are willing to prove their point in court, even if it takes years of litigation.

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Options for Santa Rosa wastewater

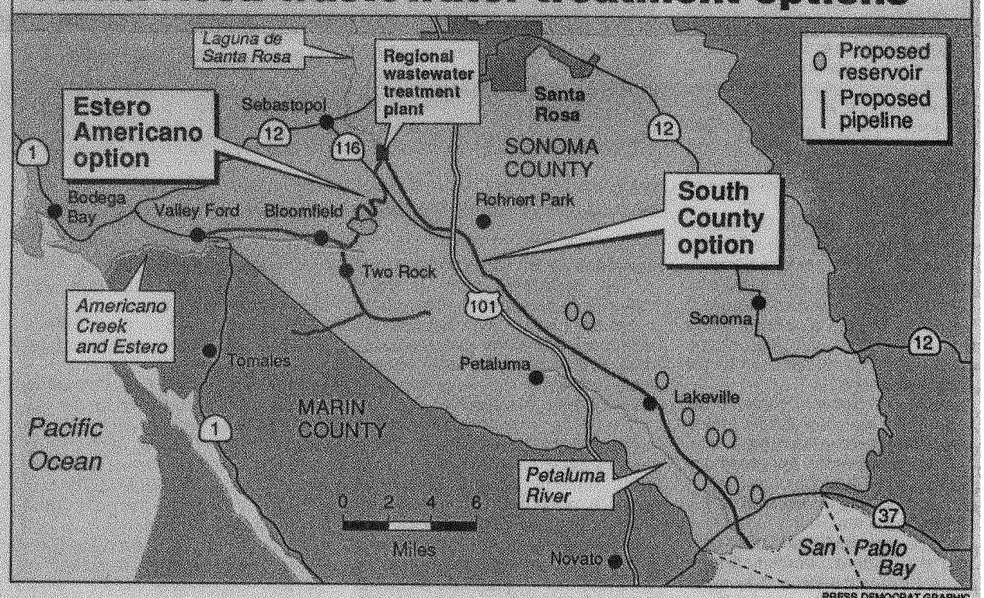
Four different ways of disposing of wastewater from the regional treatment plant are analyzed in the environmental impact report, but only two are being seriously considered - the Estero plan and the South County plan. A cross-county plan, combining the best elements of the Estero plan and the South County plan is being discussed, but does not appear in the environmental report.

	Estero plan:	South County plan:	Ocean outfall plan:	Enhanced Treatment plan:	Cross-county concept:
What you'll pay	A $128 million project using wastewater for irrigation of farmland and reclamation of wetlands in the West County.	A $160 million project using wastewater to irrigate farmlands and restore wetlands in the South County.	A $104.5 million project to discharge wastewater into the Pacific Ocean.	A $143 million project to raise wastewater quality through additional treatment and discharge it into the Russian River.	A hybrid of Estero and South County options.
	An additional $9 to $12 a month to the present average household sewage bill of $22 a month.*	An additional $11 to $14 a month.*	An additional $9 a month.	An additional $13 a month.	Unknown
What you'll get	Irrigation for an additional 7,500 acres of farmland in the Valley Ford-Bloomfield-Two Rock area. Restoration of 1,000 acres of wetlands along the Laguna de Santa Rosa and Americano Creek. A five-mile-long pipeline from the treatment plant to Llano Rd. to a five billion gallon storage reservoir in the Two Rock area.	Irrigation of an additional 4,300 acres of farmland in the Lakeville area. Restoration of 400 acres of wetlands near the Petaluma River and San Pablo Bay. A 25-mile long pipeline from the treatment plant to the Petaluma River at the mouth of San Pablo Bay and nine small reservoirs in the Lakeville area.	A 24½ mile long pipeline extending 1½ miles into the ocean near Salmon Creek. No additional restoration or irrigation.	Additional treatment facilities at the treatment plant. No increase in irrigation or reclamation.	More farmland irrigation; discharge into San Pablo Bay.
Why you may not get it	The best site for a reservoir is owned by farmers who don't want to sell. The federal government through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration may veto the project because wastewater would end up in a marine sanctuary.	Discharge into shallow water of San Pablo Bay as this project contemplates is prohibited by the San Francisco regional water quality control board.	Strenuous grassroots opposition to anything that could taint Sonoma County beaches. It also wastes a valuable resource - water for irrigation.	State law prohibits discharging more than small amounts of wastewater into a drinking water source, regardless of the degree of treatment the wastewater receives. Under this plan, the Russian River would be 25 percent wastewater.	Unknown

*The exact amount depends on whether the city can obtain a $31 million loan from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

PRESS DEMOCRAT GRAPHIC

Santa Rosa wastewater treatment options



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Joe Tresch guards his ranch and way of life

Drought has farmers banking on wastewater