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\$27.5 million land deal for laguna called long shot

Wetlands plan needs local help

By CLARK MASON
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The Army Corps of Engineers is studying a plan to buy 1,000 acres in the Laguna de Santa Rosa as part of a wetlands restoration project, but coming up with the \$27.5 million required could be tough.

The proposal, recommended in a draft report by corps' environmental planners and backed by Rep. Frank Riggs, R-Windsor, is intended to make up for stream habitat along Dry Creek lost when Warm Springs Dam was built northwest of Healdsburg in the late 1970s.

But the cost makes it a long shot, said Deborah Jerome, an environmental planner with the corps.

"It will have to get a tremendous amount of local support for it to happen. But we can try," she said.

Jerome, who wrote a recent

internal draft report that recommends the corps pursue the laguna option, said "there's no pool of money" lying around to pay for it.

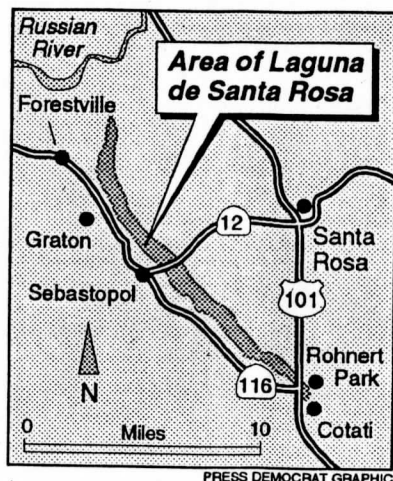
The laguna is approximately a 13-mile-long wetlands between the cities of Sebastopol and Santa Rosa.

There once was so much water in the laguna that early settlers looked upon it as a series of lakes. Farmers drained much of the land. It floods now only in the winter, but the laguna serves as habitat for a variety of animals.

Former Rep. Doug Bosco, D-Sebastopol, won House approval to create a 9,000-acre Laguna de Santa Rosa National Wildlife Refuge, but it stalled in the Senate.

After defeating Bosco and taking office last year, Riggs proposed a scaled-down alternative that would fulfill the Army Corp's intent to compensate for the environmental damage resulting from the Warm Springs Dam.

The corps looked at three potential mitigation measures, including the laguna idea.



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The first two possibilities, enhancing vegetation along the Russian River or Dry Creek, are considered too expensive because of the high price of land that would need to be purchased to restore the habitat.

"The laguna is the most practical and economic," Jerome said, ad-

ding the report does not eliminate the other two waterways.

Jerome said when Warm Springs Dam was built, a variety of environmental mitigation measures were put into effect to make up for loss of animal habitat.

But environmental documents did not address the loss of riparian corridor, or creekside vegetation.

After environmental studies were written, "Fish and Game said 'Hey, you guys forgot about riparian losses and need to look at it,'" Jerome said.

"It hasn't been a high priority," she said. "That's the reason that now we're finally finishing the report."

She said it will probably take several more weeks for higher-ups to review her report and send it back to her for changes before it can be made public.

Fred Kindel, chief of the Army Corp's environmental resources branch, said the public could get a chance by early summer to comment on the report.

Riggs is committed to the project, according to his aide Tom Roth.

Riggs wrote a letter to Corps officials last month saying, "I share the belief of environmentalists, farmers and local officials that the Army corps' laguna proposal is of central importance" to a variety of projects connected to laguna restoration.

Those projects, he said, include the expansion of Santa Rosa's subregional wastewater reclamation project; Sebastopol's Laguna Park; a proposed vernal pools preservation project; an effort to restore Santa Rosa Creek; Sonoma County open space acquisition; and expansion of wildlife preserves operated by the Department of Fish and Game.

Riggs said the 1986 Water Resources Development Act passed by Congress authorizes restoration measures necessary as a result of Corps' projects like Warm Springs

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