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Experimental wetlands project could solve wastewater problem

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by John De Salvio

Officials and engineers from Santa Rosa escorted members of the media on a tour of Kelly Farms Demonstration Wetland, an experimental wetlands project north of Sebastopol.

The 10-acre site is divided into five "cells," or wetland ponds that are connected in series.

Each is designed with a different mixture of habitats, which are monitored to study vegetation management, control of nutrients and metals, and control of sediment.

The objectives of the project are to identify design criteria so that fish and wildlife benefits are maximized; determine how the natural biological processes of a wetland affect the quality of reclaimed water; evaluate how the reclaimed water will impact the wetland; and provide wildlife and water quality data to key regulatory agencies, public groups, and individuals throughout the study.

The final project would encompass 250 acres in the Laguna, and another 250 acres in the south or west part of the county.

"It would be a buffer — another safety factor," said Santa Rosa Utilities Project Coordinator Dan Carlson.

"Any discharge component into the River would be out of a storage pond and into the wetland 90 percent of the time." He

said the only time it would be ineffective is when the Laguna is flooded.

A part of the Santa Rosa Sub-regional Water Reclamation System, the project was designed by CH2M Hill from original layouts and hydraulic designs by Robert Gearhardt, a professor at Humboldt State and designer of the successful Arcata reclamation system.

The consultants are David Smith and Rhea Williamson.

Phase I of the project was started in 1988, and hopes are to have it fully implemented by 1995, the target date for the long-range wastewater reclamation deadline imposed on Santa Rosa by the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Among agencies that will make use of the study are California department of Fish and Game, Regional Water Quality Control Board, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Marine Fisheries Service and Sanctuary), Marin/Sonoma Mosquito Abatement Districts, U.S. EPA, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In related news, a Sebastopol city councilmember told the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee in Washington, D.C. last week that the Laguna de Santa Rosa was in a "fairly degraded condition," but

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with federal protection it could be saved.

Said Anne Magnie, "(The Laguna's) self-healing capacity is considerable if given a chance. And the hope is with the federal protective designation of a refuge that it will have the opportunity to do some self healing and become more like it once

was."

Magnie's comments were made during a public hearing on Congressman Doug Bosco's bill (H.R. 2548) to designate the 9,000 acres in the Laguna de Santa Rosa basin, stretching from Cotati to Forestville, as a National Wildlife Refuge.

Bosco (D-Sebastopol) was asking for \$20 million.

Also speaking to the fisheries committee was Bob Sharp, who was chairman of the Laguna

Technical Advisory Committee, whose report was the impetus for Bosco's action.

While supported by the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services said the plan didn't merit a high priority, and some residents of the Russian River area oppose the plan for fear the area could become a dumping ground for wastewater.

Hearings will continue in September.