

County Of Sonoma Agenda Item Summary Report

Clerk of the Board Use Only

Meeting Date

Held Until

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Agenda Item No:

Agenda Item No:

Department: Sonoma County Water Agency

4/5 Vote Not Required

Contact:
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Board Date:
10/20/2009

Deadline for Board Action:

AGENDA SHORT TITLE: Ratification of U.S. Ramsar Site Nomination Letter.

REQUESTED BOARD ACTION:

Ratify a letter drafted by the Agency's General Manager/Chief Engineer to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, dated June 26, 2009, supporting the nomination of the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a "Wetland of International Significance" under the Ramsar Convention.

CURRENT FISCAL YEAR FINANCIAL IMPACT - None.

Explanation (if required): None.

Prior Board Action: None.

Alternatives – Results of Non-Approval: None.

Background:

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation has requested that the Sonoma County Water Agency (Agency) endorse the nomination of the Laguna De Santa Rosa (Laguna) and surrounding wetlands as a Wetland of International Significance under the terms of the Ramsar Convention. A letter from the Agency to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that endorses nomination of the Laguna as a Ramsar site and details the parcels included in the proposal is attached (A2). Due to a deadline on the application for nominations, the letter was prepared and forwarded to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation for inclusion in the application packet in June of this year.

The following text describes the Ramsar Convention's history, mission, and occurrence of sites in the United States, benefits, and compliance requirements of the designation.

Ramsar Convention:

The Ramsar Convention (the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance) (Convention), is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The Convention is comprised of countries and non-governmental organizations concerned at the increasing loss and degradation of wetland habitat for migratory waterbirds. The Convention worked through the 1960s on negotiating a treaty that was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. It is the only global environmental treaty that deals with a particular kind of ecosystem, and the Convention's member countries cover all geographic regions of the planet.

Mission:

The Convention's mission is "the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world". The Convention uses a broad definition of the types of wetlands covered in its mission, including lakes and rivers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, near-shore marine areas, mangroves and coral reefs, and human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs, and salt pans.

At the nexus of the Ramsar philosophy is the "wise use" concept defined as "the maintenance of ecological character, achieved through implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development". "Wise use" therefore has at its heart the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and their resources, for the benefit of humankind.

Members:

The Convention includes 159 contracting parties and has designated 1867 sites comprising 183,673,089 Hectares or 709,165 square miles. The United States joined the Convention in 1987 and currently has 24 Ramsar designated sites occupying 1,312,319 Hectares or 5,067 square miles. These sites are shown in the attached Table (A1). Of note is that both Tomales Bay and Bolinas Lagoon are already on the Ramsar list.

Benefits:

The benefits of designation are largely focused on benefiting and encouraging national and international protection of wetlands. More specifically, membership entails the endorsement of and commitment to the principles that the Convention represents and facilitates development of policies and actions, including legislation, to make the best possible use of wetland resources in the context of sustainable development.

Designation brings an increased publicity and prestige for the areas designated and increases support for conservation and wise use measures; access to the latest information and advice on adoption of the Convention's internationally-accepted standards and expert advice on national and site-related problems of wetland conservation and management; and, encourages international cooperation on wetland issues and brings the possibility of support for wetland projects, either through the Convention's own small grants assistance programs or through the Convention's contacts with multilateral and bilateral external support agencies.

Compliance:

The Convention is not a regulatory regime and has no punitive sanctions for violations upon treaty commitments – nevertheless, its terms do constitute a solemn treaty and are binding in international law in that sense. The Convention

is based upon an expectation of common and equitably shared transparent accountability. Failure to live up to the expectation could lead to political and diplomatic discomfort in high-profile international forums or the media, and would prevent getting the most out of what would otherwise be a robust and coherent system of checks and balances and mutual support frameworks.

When countries join the Convention, they are enlisting in an international effort to ensure the conservation and wise use of wetlands. The treaty includes four main commitments that the Contracting Parties have agreed to by joining.

1. List Sites - Designate at least one wetland at the time of accession for inclusion in the “Ramsar List” and to promote its conservation.
2. Wise Use - Include wetland conservation considerations in their national land-use planning. They have committed themselves to formulate and implement this planning so as to promote, as far as possible, “the wise use of wetlands in their territory.”
3. Reserves and Training - Establish nature reserves in wetlands, whether or not they are included in the Ramsar List, and promote training in the fields of wetland research, management and wardening.
4. International Cooperation - Consult with other Contracting Parties about implementation of the Convention, especially in regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, and shared species.

The Agency supports designation of the Laguna as a Ramsar site. While water quality and habitat conditions in the Laguna have been significantly impaired over the past 150 years as land has been urbanized and cleared for agriculture, it nonetheless remains Sonoma County’s most abundant wildlife area, and is prioritized by local, state and federal regulatory agencies for preservation and restoration. Approximately 200 species of birds are found in the Laguna, including Bald Eagles, Osprey and White Pelicans and it provides an important stopover for thousands of birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway. Terrestrial and aquatic species include River Otter, Bobcat, Coyote, Mink, and Badger. The Laguna supports two federally listed salmonid species, the Coho Salmon and Steelhead Trout, as well as the Sonoma County Distinct Population Segment of federally listed as threatened California Tiger Salamander. Additionally, the Laguna watershed supports vernal pools, an important form of seasonal wetland requiring particular soil types and climatic conditions, which in turn support a number of endemic plant species, several of them listed under both the state and federal Endangered Species Acts.

The Laguna’s watershed is home to most of the residents of Sonoma County, California, including the cities of Windsor, Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Cotati, and Sebastopol. It provides critical ecosystem services to this population, including capture and slowing of stormwater during flood events. The Laguna presents one of our greatest opportunity to ensure that the beauty and biotic abundance of Sonoma County will be preserved for future generations, even as our communities continue to grow. A Ramsar designation will raise the prestige of this important regional wetland and increase available support for conservation and development of sustainable uses.

Attachments: List of US Ramsar Sites (A1); Copy of letter dated June 26, 2009 (A2).

On File With Clerk:

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Board Action (If other than “Requested”)

Vote: