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 PLANNING DEPARTMENT
 

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GOVERNMENTAL CENTER




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 COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ
 

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May 29, 1998

Agenda: June 9, 1998

Board of Supervisors  
 County of Santa Cruz  
 701 Ocean Street  
 Santa Cruz, California 95060

**WATSONVILLE SLOUGHS SYSTEM - WATER QUALITY MANAGEMENT**

Dear Members of the Board:

On June 24, 1997, your Board directed Planning, Environmental Health Services and the Department of Public Works to continue an additional year of water quality monitoring in the Watsonville Sloughs System to pursue implementation of an agricultural watershed stewardship program and to report back to your Board on or before June 9, 1998.

**Background**

As you know, the Watsonville Sloughs System is the largest remaining freshwater wetland habitat on the Central Coast. The diversity of habitats present within this watershed and its occurrence on the Pacific Coast flyway make the slough system especially important as a refuge, feeding and resting area for migratory, winter and resident waterfowl. There is tremendous local interest in the protection of this unique resource. The slough system consists of six major branches: Watsonville Slough, Harkins Slough, Hanson Slough, Struve Slough, West Branch of Struve Slough and Gallighan Slough. The sloughs receive runoff from a 13,000 acre watershed area which includes a mix of urban, industrial, rural residential, agricultural and open space areas.

The Watsonville Sloughs Water Resources Management Plan (the Plan) prepared by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) with the participation of the County, the City of Watsonville and other local interests was accepted by your Board on March 12, 1996. In response to Board direction, Planning and Environmental Health Services staff, with the cooperation of the City of Watsonville staff, continued to hold periodic meetings for the purpose of information transfer and the coordination of water quality monitoring and other research in the Watsonville Sloughs System. These meetings were extremely informational and well attended.

Water Quality Findings

Basic water quality parameters in the sloughs, such as dissolved oxygen, conductivity, pH, temperature, turbidity, ammonia, nitrate and total suspended solids, were sampled by staff at the Watsonville City Utilities Lab on a quarterly basis. Environmental Health staff monitored slough waters for trace metals four times from September 1996 to August 1997. Staff also tested freshwater clams for accumulation of trace metals and synthetic organic compounds during November 1996. Test results were consistent with most previous studies. Although trace metal levels are occasionally elevated, they do not appear to be at levels that threaten biota. However, alarming levels of DDT and its degraded products and toxaphene were found at levels potentially harmful to biota. Although prohibited from use for many years, these environmentally persistent pesticides remain adhered to clay particles in soil and sediment. It is the suspension of soil particles in water runoff that releases these pesticides into the water column making them biologically available. To address this problem it is necessary to focus on measures to keep agricultural soils from entering the water of the sloughs. The extent of soil erosion problems is further demonstrated by the level of effort expended by the Department of Public Works to keep sediment cleared from the roads and by the Planning Department Code Enforcement staff to process the large number of erosion control violations in the Watsonville Sloughs System watershed.

Proposed County Activities

Continued water quality monitoring is not being recommended by staff at this time. Staff believes that the significant water quality issues in the Watsonville Sloughs System have been adequately characterized and that resources for water quality monitoring need to be directed to other parts of the County. Ongoing monitoring of contaminants in biota is being considered by the State.

As the majority of the land in this watershed under the County's jurisdiction is in agriculture, it is recommended that the County focus on soil conservation measures. The most benefit from limited County resources would be achieved by staff's continued participation in ongoing programs that are addressing the problems of agricultural runoff. The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary's Water Quality Protection Program (WQPP) is developing a detailed agricultural runoff action plan which will focus on generating farmers interest in watershed stewardship through the use of economic incentives, regulatory coordination, education and training.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assists farmers willing to invest in soil conservation practices by providing up to 70% in cost-share funding. As access to EQIP funds is dependent on a watershed's designation as a geographical priority area your Board directed staff to pursue the designation of the Watsonville Sloughs System as a NRCS geographical priority area (GPA). Planning staff was successful in this effort as the proposal ranked ninth out of fifty statewide. A GPA is eligible for funding for a maximum of five years. Over \$73,000 was allocated for the first year of funding under the federal fiscal year of 1997/98. To ensure continued EQIP funding of the Watsonville Sloughs Geographic Priority Area, new funding for future GPA's and the expansion of other

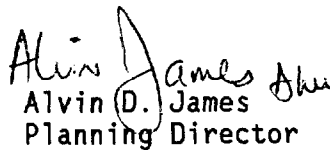
NRCS resources into Santa Cruz County, a good working relationship needs to be cultivated with the new NRCS Area Conservationist.


With all of the above ongoing activities and their direct effects on the Watsonville Sloughs Watershed, it is suggested that the Watsonville Sloughs Water Quality group continue to meet on an as needed basis.

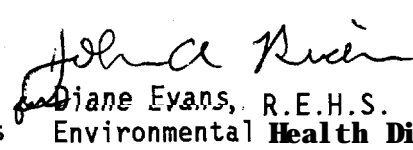
It is therefore **RECOMMENDED** that your Board:

1. Accept and file this report; and
2. Direct the Chairperson of the Board to write to the NRCS Area Conservationist to express appreciation for the funding received and to outline the additional needs of the County; and
3. Direct staff to continue to actively participate in any future Watsonville Sloughs Water Quality meetings and other related programs.

Sincerely,

 Alvin D. James  
Planning Director

 John A. Fantham  
Director of Public Works

 Diane Evans, R.E.H.S.  
Environmental Health Director

ADJ/DB:714

RECOMMENDED:

  
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SUSAN A. MAURIELLO  
County Administrative Officer

cc: City of Watsonville  
AMBAG  
Watsonville Wetlands Watch  
California Coastal Commission  
Agricultural Commissioner  
Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau  
Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Water Quality Protection Program  
Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District  
Natural Resource Conservation Service, Aptos and Salinas Offices