

Encouraging new interest seen in nation's wetlands

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Spreading out a map of the East Bay that showed the area's extensive stream system — most of it running under pavement in pipes and culverts, some of it restored from the underground — Mark Silberstein told members of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch that interest in watersheds is growing nationwide.

Silberstein, director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, suggested that the Wetlands Watch might want to create a similar map and guide to local streams and sloughs to "prevent having to do as much work as these guys are doing" to restore some of the natural waterways.

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Silberstein made his remarks last night at a regular meeting of the Wetlands Watch. About a dozen people attended.

Having achieved many of the goals set forth in its original plan, including full staff, a strong volunteer program, adequate housing for offices and a visitor's center with ongoing exhibits, the Elkhorn Slough Foundation is turning its attention to studying some of the issues that involve its surrounding watershed.

Silberstein said the foundation is involved in research, along with farmers and students at UC-Santa Cruz, that looks into ways to prevent erosion from the steep, hilly

strawberry farms that border the slough. Among the efforts is the planting of native bunch grass to try to hold back the soil.

Studies are also being done to look into what effects agricultural chemicals may have on the slough. Silberstein did say, however, that the agricultural chemicals that have been found by researchers have tended to be older, more persistent ones, such as DDT, that are no longer used. No evidence has been found, at this point, to show that more modern chemicals are finding their way into slough biota, he said. Erosion control can help keep DDT and other similar chemicals that have settled into

slough mud from circulating further, he said.

Other local agencies are turning their attention to watershed issues, too.

Silberstein said the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments is putting together a data base on local water quality, pulling together various studies that have never been coordinated. A management plan is being developed for Moro Cojo Slough by Monterey County and the Coastal Conservancy.

Silberstein said a number of unanswered questions exist about the interaction between the slough and the bay and farming, industry and residential development. One

question, posed by a member of the Wetlands group, is to what degree the slough may act as a filter, keeping harmful chemicals from entering the bay waters.

Although no extensive research has been done into this topic, Silberstein said sloughs are known for their ability to clean up a number of chemicals. The fact that extremely low levels of ag chemicals were found in fish in the bay, even though high levels were found in mussels in the slough area, might indicate that the slough is serving that function.

Silberstein emphasized the need for business, agriculture and environmentalists to work together on

preservation. He suggested that the Wetlands group try to coordinate wetlands walks with already existing farm tours.

Even though some would cast farming, business and preservation as opposing interests, Silberstein said the bottom line is "we really share a lot of the same interests and needs."

One member of the group suggested that attractions such as Elkhorn Slough help to bolster the local economy. Another member, who volunteers at the slough, said many visitors come to the area just to see the slough, and that many stay overnight.

Silberstein said no study has been done on the economic value of the slough, but he guessed that it did have some relationship to the growth of business at Moss Landing.

"The slough gets 50,000 visitors a year. Those people have to go somewhere to sleep, they have to buy lunch somewhere," he said.