

# Wetlands face toxic threat, report says

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WATSONVILLE — Calling the network of sloughs that runs through Watsonville "one of the most seriously impaired water bodies in the state," the chairman of a wetlands study group outlined the problems that face the sloughs and offered some possible solutions.

Jim Van Houton, chairman of the Technical Advisory Committee for a recently released report commissioned by the city of Watsonville and Santa Cruz County, said Monday that the study revealed high levels of agricultural runoff, heavy metals and automobile runoff from neighboring highways.

Several of the sloughs run through areas the city is hoping to acquire for housing, commercial and school development.

"Before they talk about annexing these areas, answers to all these policy questions should be addressed," Van Houton told Watsonville Wetlands

Watch members at a Monday night meeting of the group. Van Houton, a retired civil engineer who lives in La Selva Beach, is also a member of Wetlands Watch.

The year-long \$100,000 study was done by Questa Engineering and funded by the state Water Resources Control Board. It examined the Watsonville slough system, an interconnected coastal wetlands that includes Harkins, Struve, Watsonville, Hanson and Galian sloughs. It found high levels of pesticides and other toxic substances in fish and shellfish in the sloughs.

Recommendations of the study include the following:

- Establishing vegetated buffer zones between the wetlands and surrounding property.
- Creating additional wetlands that would filter the contaminated water that goes into the sloughs.
- Implementing a slough system management plan to set policies for the area.

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● Conducting future studies to determine the sources of some of the pollutants now filtering into the sloughs.

Van Houton emphasized the need to retain the wetlands as a recharge area for the region's depleted aquifer, which is being degraded by encroaching seawater. Rather than building on the wetlands, he said, they could be enhanced by infusing them with water that is now being pumped from Watsonville and Harkins sloughs into Monterey Bay. Such a plan could improve the quality of the sloughs, while providing more water that would filter down to the aquifer and forestall a pending water shortage.

Van Houton talked specifically about the Tai property, west of town near Lee Road, which has been recommended for a city-sponsored low-income housing project that the wetlands group opposes. City planners have proposed the housing complex to alleviate severe overcrowding in the area, particularly of farmworker families who are living in garages and other substandard housing.