

# Wetlands Watch protects Watsonville's sloughs <sup>1-B</sup>

BY PAULINE ZENNER  
Special to the Mercury News

For decades, Watsonville's wetlands were regarded as worthless and were drained by the federal government for farming, agriculture and development.

Today, with less than 10 percent of California's original 4 million acres of wetlands remaining, efforts to restore the endangered habitats are mounting.

Leading the effort in Watsonville, which may have as much as two-thirds of its wetlands remaining, is Wetlands Watch, founded two years ago to fight a proposal to build a 1,000-unit housing development adjacent to one of eight existing sloughs.

The wetlands advocacy group, which has grown from a handful of people to about 200, "cut its teeth in opposing the Villages Housing Project at Struve Slough," said Wetlands Watch co-founder Richard Bernard. "We raised such a hue and cry that

ultimately the developers had second thoughts about the successful completion of the project."

The developers now are planning a smaller version of the development, he said.

Bernard said Wetlands Watch is trying to protect the flora, fauna and wildlife of one of the most unique wetland areas of California's north coast.

The Watsonville Slough System lies along the western border of the city and continues a few miles out to the Pajaro River. Struve Slough can be seen from Main Street in Watsonville, and all the sloughs, except for Sunset Beach Marsh, are fresh-water wetlands that are dependent upon rainwater for replenishment.

The wetlands remain wet all year long because of a 200-foot barrier of blue clay 50 to 200 feet beneath the soil that prevents the soil from draining. The clay rims

See WETLANDS, Page 4B

## Watsonville group guards wetlands

### ■ WETLANDS

from Page 1B

much of the Monterey Bay, but it's particularly solid beneath the Pajaro Valley, said Jerry Busch, an intern with the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), which is developing a slough master plan.

Busch said the sloughs, which remain green all summer and flood three to five months out of the year, provide food for more than a dozen birds of prey, including hawks, golden eagles, merlins, owls and small falcons, which feed on a mouse-like rodent, the meadow vole.

In addition, the slough supports more than 20 species of waterfowl, including Canada and snow geese and whistling swans.

Estimates of the total size of the remaining Watsonville wetlands range from 300 acres to 800 acres, depending on seasonal expansion and shrinkage.

Dorothy Steele, Wetlands Watch tour guide, said most of the people who take the wetlands tour have little or no understanding of the significance of wetlands.

"I talk about the habitat, discuss the drainage system from the foothills to the river, and about the history of Watsonville," she said. "As people become more aware of habitat loss, therefore the loss of wildlife, they become more aware of the importance of preserving it."

Bernard says Wetlands Watch has an "absolute necessity" to work with the four groups at odds over the wetlands: the farmers, housing advocates, developers and environmentalists.

"We recognize the inevitability of having to accommodate some growth," Bernard said. "But we think it's possible to save the wetlands and still not deny the affordable and the modest-income population an opportunity for decent housing."

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios compliments the group for its success in educating the community about the wildlife habitat in the wetlands.

And, said Rios, group members

are also realists about environmental preservation balanced with the preservation and needs of the agriculture community.

"I think the preservation of our wetlands is overdue. It's a tremendous resource," Rios said. "But we live in an area where we have little land for the growing population of Latinos and Mexicans who are the backbone of our agriculture community. We have to draw the lines across which wetlands we won't move into and which we will to provide affordable housing and economic vitality."

ABAG intern Busch said the hundreds of acres of remaining wetlands around Watsonville should not be an obstacle to development.

### 'Our sloughs are a blessing'

"Our sloughs are a blessing that should become a centerpiece of community pride and urban design," Busch said. "Although agricultural and wetland use sometimes conflict, both embody the spirit of rural life in the Pajaro Valley that is so essential to the community's identity."

Despite more than 80 years of land reclamation efforts, Busch said much of the wetland vegetation is re-established and in some areas thriving. Nature, he said, is reclaiming its own domain, shown in the return of the native yellow stickweed flowers, once reduced to a small colony but now abundant.

ABAG has recently been designated the lead agency to oversee the preparation of a Watsonville Slough Master Plan, said Busch.

### Improving water quality

"We're looking at ways of improving slough water quality and perhaps restoring the wetlands," he said.

Busch said ABAG is preparing an application for a state clean-water grant to study the sloughs.

"We're asking for between \$75,000 and \$100,000 to pull together a large volume of water-quality data that has revealed profound water-quality degradation," and come up with recommendations to improve it, he said.