

Visitors center for Elkhorn Slough

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WATSONVILLE — The waterfowl, fish and crustaceans have been visiting Elkhorn Slough near Moss Landing for centuries, but until recently, the public's excursions have been few and far between.

That should change June 22 when the state unveils its new visitors' center and five-mile trail network through the national estuarine sanctuary.

The visitors' center will be the departure point to explore the 1,250 acres of wetlands and ponds, which have been open on a limited basis for the past year.

Avian enthusiasts will be able to view the 200 species of birds that inhabit the slough, and catch glimpses of the 80 different species of fish that wallow in the waters.

It's a dream come true for Elkhorn Slough Foundation members, who've supported the education and research programs at the sanctuary for the past 2½ years, according to Mark Silberstein, program coordinator.

But all is not well at Elkhorn Slough.

Recent studies of the mussels have turned up elevated levels of pesticides and coliforms, high enough to alarm state Fish and Game officials, said Ken Moore, the department's resource manager at Elkhorn Slough.

Moore was one of seven speakers at the J.J. Crosetti Ranch in Watsonville Wednesday afternoon to address the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments on the issues surrounding Elkhorn Slough.

Moore said later that toxaphene, endosulphan and DDT — a pesticide now banned from use — have turned up in the mussel-watch program.

"They're not at levels that are a problem for air-breathing wildlife yet," said Moore. "But we will increase the effort at monitoring the situation."

Moore and others have contacted serious birdwatchers to determine if they've seen any changes in the bird population that would present a serious pollution problem like the one at the Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge near Los Banos.

"None can recall any obvious problems with deformities, die-offs, that kind of thing," he said.

Nevertheless, the county of Monterey Health Department has posted a warning to clam-diggers that shellfish should not be taken or consumed.

"Elkhorn came along at a time when there was a lot of publicity (about contamination at Kesterson)," said Moore. "It's probably positive in that it's focused attention on it and made people think, 'Let's avoid it and not turn Elkhorn Slough

into another Kesterson."

A key question that has arisen in the monitoring programs is, Where is the pollution coming from? To date, no "point source" of contamination has been found, said Moore. No farmer or home has been singled out as the source of pollution.

Pesticides aren't the only contaminants turning up at Elkhorn Slough. Moore said coliforms, possibly from cows or leaking septic tanks, have been discovered.

Another environmental concern is soil runoff from strawberry fields on the slopes above the wetlands.

Ron Edwards, of the U.S. Soils Conservation Service, said the agency has been working with farmers to solve the sedimentation runoff into the slough. One of the solutions has been to install underground drains to collect the erosion before it spills into the estuary's ponds.

With the help of federal and state agencies, the keepers of Elkhorn Slough Estuarine Sanctuary hope to preserve it as the significant coastal resource it is.

AMBAG directors vowed to offer any assistance they could to further that effort.

Wetlands

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EUROPEAN HEAT