



A view of Struve Slough at Lee Road in Watsonville.

Kurt Ellison

Bird's eye view of local sloughs

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It's difficult not to notice Watsonville's sloughs, especially this time of year, when they are just about the only green places — parks and fields aside — left in town.

Kids hunt for crayfish in the tall cattails. Executives driving to work slow down for a second to remind themselves that there is something green and spacious outside their office walls. Nature enthusiasts, stopping by the road to watch a pair of egrets, take a few minutes to pick up trash.

Others may not appreciate them in quite the same way, viewing them as weed-filled, bramble-covered areas great for unloading unwanted items — or as a challenging dirt or motorbike course.

But as obvious as they may be, and despite the fact that they are particularly crucial wildlife habitats, providing plentiful food, nesting sites and resting places for birds and other animals, no one is really paying close attention to what's happening in the sloughs.

Dozens of interviews with officials at regulatory agencies revealed that while regulations for slough protection abound, there is little money for studies or for man-

agement plans to make sure the sloughs are healthy.

Because of their environmental significance, protection of wetlands — a more general term that applies to some sloughs — initially had strong support on the federal level from President Bush, who declared there should be "no net loss" of wetlands. Recently, however, Bush, saying current restrictions blocked development, proposed that the definition of wetlands be narrowed, removing federal protection for millions of acres. Much of Watsonville's slough system is likely to be disqualified under the new federal rules.

Although current state and local protections will probably remain in place, conflicts between developers and environmentalists will continue to in-

tensify in Santa Cruz County, as, little by little, buildable land fills up.

This year, Pajaro Valley residents formed what may be Watsonville's first environmental group, Watsonville Wetlands Watch, in response to the proposed Villages project, which would have placed 900 homes on a 150-acre parcel bordered by Struve and Watsonville sloughs. Environmental restrictions placed on the project by the City Council and continuing pressure from environmentalists may have stopped the project, at least for now.

A series of stories, which will run in the Register-Pajaronian for four days beginning Monday, is intended to provide a closer look at Watsonville's slough system, the threats it faces, and what's being done to protect it.



REFERENCE

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