

# Watsonville sloughs go under microscope

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A yearlong study to devise a far-reaching water management plan for Watsonville sloughs will be the topic of an Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments meeting Wednesday.

The study could eventually lead to an overall plan to manage Watsonville Slough and its branches, Harkins, Hanson, Gallighan, Struve and West Branch, said Jim Van Houten, a member of an advisory committee for the project.

"This is probably the place to start for a wetland management plan. Many of the elements of a wetland management plan are included in this plan," Van Houten said.

"I think it's the right direction to go if you have something worth saving, and I believe we do."

The \$108,600 study, funded by the EPA under the Federal Clean Water Act, and by the city of Watsonville and Santa Cruz County, is designed to address water quality issues that have been a concern to conservationists for more than 15 years. AMBAG is administering the study.

Wetland environments are important to wildlife, commercial fisheries and farmers who depend on water and other natural resources found in sloughs.

Studies by the California Regional Water Quality Control

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Board have shown that grease, oil, radiator fluid, pesticides and other pollutants seep into the 21-square-mile watershed surrounding Watsonville Slough and its branches, said AMBAG planner Frank Barron.

For example, high levels of toxic pesticides were found in mussels from Watsonville Slough. The tests, done between 1982 and 1986, detected levels 95 percent higher than those found in other California mussels tested from 1977 to 1986.

Such pollutants can be detrimental to wildlife and plants in the Watsonville Slough system, he said.

Fertilizers from yards and farms that wash into the slough can cause algae to proliferate and steal away oxygen used by fish and other slough organisms. Other compounds can also deplete oxygen levels as they are washed into sloughs and decompose.

Erosion of the slough channels

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can also affect water quality, Barron said.

The study is designed to identify pollution sources and evaluate water quality within the slough system. When the study is complete, the consultants will write a plan on how water quality can be improved for wildlife and recreational use, and how urban and agricultural pollutants can be diverted or removed from slough channels.

Hydrology data from the study could ultimately be used in the Watsonville sloughs management plan.

The meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Wednesday in the Watsonville City Council Chambers at 250 Main St.

REFERENCE