

## The continuing challenges for MCE Clean Energy

by Doug Wilson and Ken Strong

There was tension in the room at the December 2009 Mill Valley Council meeting. Council members had received a letter from eleven former mayors urging them to rescind their previous vote to join [Marin Clean Energy \(MCE\)](#). MCE was California's first foray into community choice energy - a bold new venture to confront climate change and big utility inertia by enabling local control of clean energy purchases. The letter from the former mayors cited a recent Civil Grand Jury report which argued that joining MCE would be too risky for small communities and should be abandoned. A former state assemblyman spoke at the meeting and also urged backing out of MCE.

Diligent staff work by the Marin Independent Journal revealed that a prominent former county supervisor and the present assemblyman were, in fact, being paid by a front organization covertly funded largely by PG&E. Their goal was to spread doubt about MCE's viability - first to the Grand Jury and now to the City Council. Word was out about PG&E's tactics and the Mill Valley Council remained steadfast. Despite a barrage of skeptical editorials and years of controversy, the necessary votes around the county and \$1.7M in startup loans were found. MCE was officially launched on May 7, 2010 and began serving customers later that year.

Of the many possible strategies identified by Marin County to reduce its production of greenhouse gasses, by far the most effective to date has been its pioneering creation of Marin Clean Energy,

[Continued on page 8](#)

## Reimagining San Geronimo Valley



Nona Dennis

TPL leads a small group tour over Nicasio Valley Road.

by Nona Dennis and [reimaginesangeronimo.com](#)

On a recent Saturday in October, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) officially opened the "gates" of the former San Geronimo Golf Course wide and welcomed a large public onto their 157-acre property. The grass that once was emerald green, thanks to a fifty-year regimen of irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticides, was tawny in its autumnal state, a natural continuation of the surrounding summer-dry hills.

It was a day made for reconnecting with the land and envisioning new possibilities. TPL's purpose was to begin the lengthy process of reimagining how the property can evolve into a place that will protect the natural character of San Geronimo Valley ("Valley") and West Marin, restore and enhance critical fish and wildlife habitats, and connect people, families, school children, and recreationists throughout the Valley - in brief, reimagining how the property can serve the local Valley community as well as the larger Marin public, and better sustain the fish and wildlife that have inhabited that area

since time immemorial. Pro-golf protesters at the event, however, were a reminder that the path forward won't be easy.

### *TPL and the future of the San Geronimo property*

Most readers are familiar with the story of how TPL came to own the San Geronimo

[Continued on page 10](#)

#### In This Issue—

MCL: Celebrating 85 years — [page 2](#)

Editorial: the future of Point Reyes National Seashore — [page 3](#)

Funding for forest health — [page 4](#)

Events — [pages 6 & 7](#)

MCL positions on upcoming ballot measures — [page 9](#)

## Celebrating 85 Years

# Because of a bridge - celebrating eighty-five years

Marin Conservation League has had a year to commemorate its 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We acknowledged the occasion at our [Annual Dinner in April](#); we revived the Walks into Conservation History, initiated in 2009 on the occasion of MCL's 75th Anniversary; and we commemorated the shared history of MCL and Marin Art and Garden Center on the eve of MAGC's 75th Anniversary at a special event for the MCL Leadership Circle.

But what is the real date to mark the moment when a "good idea," born out of civic duty of a handful of Marin Garden Club members, became an action with far-reaching consequences?

If one can tie the League's birth to a specific date, it would be a meeting of the Marin Garden Club at the home of Mrs. Norman B. (Caroline) Livermore on **November 6, 1934**. Caroline Livermore had just returned from a trip east where she had admired some eastern parkways in New York and along the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. to Mt. Vernon. As the minutes from that meeting stated:

*She expressed the wish that the Marin Garden Club might do some such planning and zoning in Marin Co. The (Garden Club) President Mrs. Griffith asked Mrs. Livermore to be the Chairman of a committee. Mrs. John [Portia] Forbes, Mrs. A.J. [Sepha] Evers, and Mrs. [Helen] Van Pelt volunteered to serve on such a committee."*

Marin in 1934 was still pastoral. There were

hundreds of dairy and beef ranches, spread everywhere across the county, even along the corridor where the new Redwood Highway was taking shape but was far from complete. Indeed, until 1931, when the Richardson Bay Bridge was opened, the highway snaked over the maddeningly slow curves of Camino Alto, and through each town in the Ross Valley. Residents still traveled mostly by rail, with ferry connections to San Francisco and

dedicated May 12, 1935.

Outside of several municipal ball fields, the only publicly-owned lands were Muir Woods National Monument, set aside in 1908, Marin Municipal Water District's watershed lands, secured in 1912, and the initial 500-plus acres of Mt. Tamalpais State Park. Most of Marin was undeveloped. All this was about to change with the anticipated opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.



*Opening Day of the Golden Gate Bridge, May 27, 1937*

Richmond.

The County's population stood at 42,000, one-sixth of today's figure. County leaders had just completed a long, intensive lobbying effort to lure a military air base to Marin: Hamilton Field, under construction, would be

"The bridge was the catalyst (for the birth of Marin Conservation League)" said Bill Evers, son of co-founder Sepha Evers - "that, and the fear of 'Los Angeles-type development' once the bridge was opened."

In 1934, the group of Marin Garden Club women were among those few who foresaw how extensive the change in Marin might be when

the bridge was completed. They were among an even smaller number who recognized the need to plan for this change. And they were basically the only ones who actively and effectively did anything to make that planning a reality.

And the rest is a history worth celebrating!

## Nature Note

# Migrating newts to get a helping hand

The season for migrating newts is approaching, and with it, the inevitable drama of human activity colliding with nature's drive to perpetuate a species. Former MCL Director and West Marin rancher Sally Gale is has stepped forward this year to ward off the collision, or at least minimize the carnage. In August, Sally, in collaboration with SPAWN and others, formed the Chileno Valley Newt Brigade (CVNB) and in October

began training volunteers who plan to assist masses of newts who must migrate across Chileno Valley Road from their hillside home to reach Laguna Lake, where they breed. As newts begin the migration at the first sign of moisture in late fall or early winter, Brigade volunteers will be the first ever to carry as many newts as possible across the road and out of harm's way!



*It's the season for mating!*

November through March is migration and breeding season for the California newt, a native salamander species with a bright orange belly. Newts spend about half the year in sheltered upland areas, eating insects and other small invertebrates and hiding in

[Continued on page 11](#)

## Editorial

# MCL, ranches, and the future of Point Reyes National Seashore

On September 23, the Point Reyes National Seashore ("Seashore" or "park") closed public review of a Draft EIS that analyzes the impacts of various alternatives for amending the park's General Management Plan. MCL's letter of comment was one of 7,600 received by National Park Service (NPS), who promised to respond to them in a Final EIS in early 2020.

The number and diversity of comments gives credence to the observations of Robert B. Keiter in his insightful history of the National Park Service *To Conserve Unimpaired: The Evolution of the National Park Idea* (2012) that the national park "Best Idea" is not a single idea, but rather an amalgam of ideas that have evolved over time. Further, national parks have never been isolated nature reserves. From their inception, national parks have been interconnected with the surrounding world, with deep economic and cultural connections to adjacent communities, as well as more fragile ecological linkages to surrounding landscapes.

No national park demonstrates these connections as consistently as Point Reyes National Seashore. Set within the local West Marin context with its generations-old agricultural and rural village culture, as well as within an hour's reach of a large metropolitan population, the Seashore has been buffeted by tensions among its local, regional, and national followers since its authorization. Like most other national parks, it has been "forged in controversy, reflecting a larger national discourse about nature conservation and its role in local public life." (Keiter)

## *MCL supports Alternative B in the EIS – with conditions. Why?*

Simply put, Alternative B, the NPS's "Preferred Alternative," calls for offering up-to-20-year leases to continue the multi-generational dairy and cattle ranches that pre-existed the Seashore's authorization in 1962. Ranches cover 25 percent of the Seashore (in comparison, Wilderness covers 45 percent), and roughly 12 ½ percent of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, all in



Carlos Porrata

*Tule elk and cattle graze together at Point Reyes National Seashore.*

its Northern District. According to the Draft EIS, continued ranching under Alternative B would be conditioned by an array of "best practices" and "mitigations" to ensure that agricultural operations preserve sensitive resources and protect other environmental conditions such as soils and water quality. In addition to the mandatory "No Action" or "status quo" Alternative, the Draft EIS also examines an Alternative that would reduce total acreage of ranches by about 25 percent; an Alternative that would allow the six dairies to convert their operations to beef cattle within a specified period of time; and an Alternative that would eliminate ranching from the park altogether. Each alternative presents a differing approach to managing the elk populations.

## *The answer is not simple and requires a little history*

As the national park idea has evolved over time, so have approaches to managing the Seashore. Although not mandated by the park's authorizing legislation that ranching would continue in perpetuity, the ranchers played a key role in selling their lands to make the park possible. That relationship was fostered during the long tenure of one superintendent who recognized that cows and cattle are not only part of the cultural history of the Seashore but are also "co-

managers" of the grazed landscape that had been intensively managed for several hundred years by cattle and, before that, by burning. There were other indications that the working relationships between ranchers and park management were generally positive and that the park was committed to keeping the ranches viable and an integral part of the national seashore. That position has been reinforced several times. In 1978, the legislation was amended to enable issuing leases to the ranchers. In 2018 Olema Valley and Point Reyes Dairy Ranches Historic Districts, including portions of the planning area, were listed in the national register.

## *MCL's evolution of conservation in the Seashore*

MCL's conservation investment in Point Reyes National Seashore is almost as old as MCL itself. As early as 1938, MCL had its first success in enabling acquisition of Marin's scenic coastal lands for the public; a 54-acre property on Drakes Beach would become the first piece of the eventual Seashore. Throughout the 1960s, MCL worked in behalf of obtaining funds to acquire lands within the park boundaries, including the 1969 Save our Shore (SOS) campaign led by Peter Behr that sent 500,000 letters to Congress and President Nixon to free up Land and Water

[Continued on page 4](#)

## Editorial: PRNS *from page 3*

Conservation funds. MCL volunteered many hours to advising on the preliminary master plan for the Seashore, with the objective of preserving it primarily as Natural Area – a wildlife refuge. Later in the 1970s, MCL was among the local environmental organizations who countered the Park Service's offer of 5,000 acres for designated Wilderness by insisting on 32,000 acres, almost half of the park's eventual 71,000 acres. In later years, MCL would support the park in its decision to eliminate the non-native fallow deer populations that were devastating native ecosystems.

In a parallel time frame, as Marin's rural lands were increasingly threatened with urban development during the 1960's, MCL recognized that the most effective way to stave off development was to ensure the survival of agriculture through policy, restrictive zoning, and advocacy support.

By the 1970s MCL had developed a working relationship with dairymen and ranchers in West Marin and had come to view the value of agricultural lands for their own sake, not just as open space. Karin Urquhart, then-Executive director of MCL said: "If you sold off the agricultural land and just let it go for open space, it would change the character dramatically . . . it would not be the pastoral scene we know today."

This is where connections between the Seashore and the outside community have been most apparent. It has never been easy to manage economically viable agricultural operations within a NPS unit that was established initially to protect scenic resources and promote recreation, and later managed to preserve natural resources. At the same time, the ranches on the Seashore, together with the family farms and ranches that make up most of north-western Marin County – more than 30 percent of the county's land area – constitute a single agricultural

economy and a critical mass that enables the whole to remain viable. To this critical mass, the Seashore ranches continue to contribute a significant portion.

With the assurance that three-quarters of Point Reyes National Seashore remain in Wilderness and Natural Area, and with the environmental specifications outlined in Alternative B in the Draft EIS to guide sustainable agriculture, MCL believes that the park will continue to preserve and protect the diverse flora and fauna, sensitive and endangered species, environmental quality, geology, culture and history, and scenic resources that are its legacy.

Nona Dennis, Editor

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## *Report on climate, wildfire safety, and forest health*

# Study of forest health strategies in Marin receives state funding

A mounting fuel load, legacy of California's long history of fire suppression, compounded by forest disease and the reality of episodic drought due to a warming climate, has increased the risk of catastrophic wildfire throughout the state. Although spared from recent devastating wildfires, Marin County has recognized the local risk for years and is addressing it in a variety of ways. Among other ongoing efforts, Marin's public land managers have accelerated construction and maintenance of fuel breaks and stepped up other vegetation maintenance and removal work. Their current focus is on reducing wildfire risk to neighboring residents and their homes by managing vegetation in the interface between public wildlands and urban neighborhoods. Why not take these efforts aimed at ensuring public safety and merge them with strategies designed to improve the overall health of Marin's forest ecosystems?

## *Funding of One Tam grant from California's cap-and-trade program*

A recent article in this Newsletter on the uses of California's cap-and-trade program funds (Greenhouse Gas Reduction Program [GGRP]) in Marin alluded to a pending grant to One Tam to develop strategies to improve forest health. ([conservationleague.org/images/storeis/Newsletters/NL19D\\_SeptOctober\\_online\\_reduced.pdf](http://conservationleague.org/images/storeis/Newsletters/NL19D_SeptOctober_online_reduced.pdf)) The One Tam partnership of collaborating land agencies – Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), Marin County Parks, State Parks, National Parks, and Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy – could foresee that a comprehensive regional forest health strategy in Marin would yield multiple benefits. Such

a strategy would not only complement the county and state fire departments' ongoing public safety programs but also promote climate resiliency, including carbon sequestration, conserve wildland ecosystems, and mitigate wildfire in our forests. With the recent award of a \$720,000 grant from the State Coastal Conservancy as part of a Regional Forest Health Strategy (RFHS), One Tam now has this opportunity.

In numerous respects, the One Tam partnership is ideally suited to lead this program in Marin. The partnership has already invested over \$1.5 million dollars in obtaining aerial imagery to produce a high-resolution digital vegetation map set for the entire county. The new maps update, expand, and standardize disparate and incomplete maps accumulated from numerous sources over several decades. The map layers delineate over



[Continued on page 5](#)

## Forest health *from page 4*

100 vegetation types. By estimating cover densities of hardwood and conifer stands, including concentrated areas of tree mortality and fuel loading due to sudden oak death and other pathogens and combining these layers with other data and infrastructure, the maps will enable identifying high priority sites for reducing fuel load and employing other techniques to revitalize forests.

The One Tam study program also will evaluate whether to complement the remote-sensing resources used to create the digital maps with traditional ground-based forest stand inventories and assessments, such as those conducted recently in Tomales Bay State Park and Mt Tamalpais watershed, in order to assess fuel loads and model greenhouse gas (GHG) storage and release balances.

### *How do you measure "forest health"?*

The One Tam RFHS project will also tee-off the recent experience of a demonstration project in forest health on MMWD watershed lands. Working in partnership with the USDA Forest Service and researchers from Cal Poly and UC Davis, MMWD conducted a 30-acre multifaceted demonstration project in 2014 to evaluate treatment options for thinning brush to reduce fuel hazard and promote tree regeneration in forests that have been

degraded by sudden oak death. The pilot project, whose sites are located primarily in the mixed redwood-Douglas fir-tanbark oak forests on Bolinas ridge, was designed to quantify the effects of various treatments on a range of ecosystem functions, including above and below ground carbon storage, greenhouse gas exchange, water yield, seedling recruitment, and biodiversity and habitat utilization by multiple bird and pollinator species. The One Tam RFHS program will continue the MMWD research and support additional demonstration projects, with the goal of developing clear metrics for measuring forest health.

### *Environmental compliance*

The activities involved in studying forest health will likely require some level of environmental review, particularly if projects are scaled-up for broader application. Each of the One Tam partner agencies operates within NEPA and/or CEQA requirements for their specific activities at designated sites or within defined areas. These requirements include measures for protecting endangered species, aquatic and wetland habitats, air quality, cultural resources, aesthetics and recreational values, hydrology, and so on. These are ongoing concerns of any research on Marin County public lands: what are the potential impacts? In anticipation of scaling-up projects, One Tam will develop a framework for environmental compliance, such as

identifying gaps in existing compliance documents and options for amending them, and considering opportunities to expedite or streamline new compliance as needed. The goal is to have projects ready to go when future grants are offered by CalFire, the California Natural Resources Agency, and other sources to fund further work in multi-benefit forest health and reducing wildfire risk.

### *Engaging the community*

In its six years of existence, the One Tam partnership, has been particularly effective in bringing the local community into the stewardship of Marin's public lands. Many volunteer opportunities are offered to residents, park visitors, students, and others for learning about and caring for these lands. MCL has continued to engage in One Tam activities since the partnership's establishment. The partner agencies also have strong working relationships with Marin County Fire Department and FireSafe Marin. Together, the One Tam partnership and the fire safety community will continue to host forums, conduct site tours, and otherwise educate the public with the goal of increasing public awareness and support for forest management that reduces wildfire risk even while protecting and improving ecosystem health and climate resilience.



*Images courtesy of Marin Municipal Water District*

*Built-up fuel loads increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires; resilient forest treatments reduce those fuel loads (above) and employ other techniques to revitalize forests.*

## Events - recaps

### Walk into Conservation History

On September 28, 40 eager hikers convened under the redwoods to hear about the exploits of Samuel Penfield Taylor, who found a site on Papermill Creek in 1855 and prospered from logging, running a paper mill, and managing a resort. Jean Berensmeier, Nona Dennis, and Michael O'Shea shared their wealth of information on the natural and political history and on the mill itself, followed by a 2.5 mile walk under the trees along the Pioneer Trail. We were delighted to see so many people enjoying the park and its history - thank you for joining us!



Photos: Holly Smith



Far Left: Jean Berensmeier addresses the group.

Left: Jean Berensmeier, Nona Dennis, and Michael O'Shea share stories and laughs with the group.

### Business-Environment Breakfast: Preparing for Wildfire in California

A sold out crowd on Friday, September 13 illustrated the magnitude of public interest on the topic of wildfires in California. Thank you to all who attended and of course, to our knowledgeable speakers: Janet Klein, Director of One Tam Community Conservation Programs, who presented information prepared by Hugh Safford, PhD; Jason Weber, Fire Chief of Marin County Fire Dept. and Ross Valley Fire Dept.; and Sarah Minnick, Vegetation & Fire Ecologist with Marin County Parks. Business-Environment breakfasts will continue in 2020.



Speakers Janet Klein, Jason Weber, and Sarah Minnick answer audience questions.



Gail Seymour, right, and Sandy Goldman continue the conversation after the speaker presentations.

Photos: Kristen Nolan

## Events - upcoming

# Business - Environment Breakfast: Is Silent Spring Just Around the Corner?

In 1962, author Rachel Carson warned of a future "silent spring" in which no birds would sing. Her seminal book on the subject helped launch the modern environmental movement. Yet, there has still been a precipitous decline in wildlife that many scientists call the "sixth mass extinction." Lesser known is the catastrophic collapse of insect populations.

Dr. Paul da Silva, professor of biology and environmental science at the College of Marin, and Nina Sokolov, PhD candidate at UC Berkeley, will address different aspects of the "insect apocalypse," why it is occurring, and what can be done at the individual and institutional level to restore ecosystems that support insects and the species that depend on them.



**Friday, November 8, 2019**

**7:30am - 9:00am**

McInnis Park Clubhouse  
350 Smith Ranch Rd., San Rafael

Register [www.silentsspringbreakfast.eventbrite.com](http://www.silentsspringbreakfast.eventbrite.com) or call 415-485-6257

\$15 members | \$20 non-members  
Tickets include buffet breakfast

This event is generously sponsored by



## Annual Holiday Party



**Friday, December 6, 2019**  
**4:00 pm - 7:00 pm**

MCL Offices:  
175 N. Redwood Drive  
San Rafael

Celebrate the season with ample hor d'oeuvres, drinks, and merriment at our popular annual holiday celebration. This event is free to MCL members and their guests; please bring food and/or monetary donations for the SF -Marin Food Bank.

RSVP online [www.mclholiday19.eventbrite.com](http://www.mclholiday19.eventbrite.com), email [mcl@marinconservationleague.org](mailto:mcl@marinconservationleague.org), or call 415-485-6257

## MCE from page 1

now called MCE ([mcecleanenergy.org](http://mcecleanenergy.org)). This represents a real and all-too-rare change in the marketplace and in the political world, and as we all know, change rarely comes easily.

To properly appreciate the achievement of MCE and the statewide "community choice energy" movement that it pioneered, it's important to understand that there has been, and will continue to be, opposition. The following account chronicles some of the battles in the larger ongoing effort to launch MCE and keep it on track. Marin Conservation League's (MCL) Climate Action Working Group has supported MCE's response to these challenges since its auspicious launch in 2010.

### MCE launches

The birth of MCE was anything but easy. Following the famous meltdown in the California electricity market in 2001 (remember Enron?), legislation passed in 2002 allowed for the formation of a new type of entity, a "community choice aggregator," or CCA, governed by locally elected officials, that could purchase power on behalf of its constituent citizens. At the time MCE was being proposed, about 14 percent of PG&E's energy came from renewable sources. MCE promised 25 percent renewables.

Debate was hot in the years preceding MCE's launch. It took courage to stand up to status quo opposition and vote to commit public assets to a new and untried venture. Then-Supervisor Charles McGlashan and a small circle of colleagues put in years of long hours to gather the votes needed from every part of the county. But launch was only the beginning of the struggle.

2010 also brought the much more direct challenge of Proposition 16, funded with \$46 million by PG&E, which would have required local governments to win the approval of two-thirds of voters before pursuing community choice with any public money – an intentionally insurmountable hurdle. The measure was narrowly defeated by voters. Legislation in 2011 banned PG&E from marketing against CCAs.

A shift in tactics in 2014 saw the battle

move to the legislature with the introduction of AB 2145. Sponsored by an ex-lobbyist for big utilities, this would have required all new CCA customers to "opt in," rather than be automatically enrolled with the option to "opt out." It would have made creation of Sonoma Clean Power and all succeeding CCAs more difficult or impossible. A delegation from MCL joined many others in Sacramento to defeat the bill.

### Struggles Continue

More recently the struggle has continued before the Public Utilities Commission (PUC), where gaining and maintaining a level playing field with Investor Owned Utilities (IOUs), like PG&E, has been a challenge for CCAs. A major example is the Power Charge Indifference Adjustment (PCIA) charged to CCA customers. In theory this charge assures those who remain customers of the big utilities that they are not required to continue paying the full cost of the more expensive energy contracted by the IOUs before their former customers switched to CCAs. Currently PCIA charges make up about 25 percent of the energy generation costs on a CCA customer's bill. MCE and the CCAs dispute the opaque way in which these charges are calculated, but are hampered because the IOUs retain control of accounting and billing.

Another contested issue concerns the crucial responsibility of state regulators to ensure that energy resources will be adequate for California's power needs at every moment of the day or night. The PUC fears that the sum of power purchases by the growing number of independent CCAs will detract from the commission's ability to meet the total needs of all its customers. The PUC has proposed that a central buyer guarantee adequate power, but CCAs are afraid that such a buyer will intrude on CCAs' ability



Image courtesy of MCE

*Charles McGlashan, former Supervisor, and Dawn Weisz, MCE CEO, plug in at MCE's 2010 opening and ribbon cutting ceremony.*

to purchase renewable power for their own customers.

Despite all of this resistance, MCE and the now eighteen other CCAs have significantly reduced California's greenhouse gas emissions in the energy sector and have helped motivate the big utilities to do the same. MCE, which now serves nearly half a million customers, is on track to meet California's renewable energy portfolio targets thirteen years early and greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals 20 years ahead of schedule.

Interested in deepening your engagement with climate change issues? Attend a MCL Climate Action Working Group Meeting. The group is scheduled to meet the third Friday of every month, 9:00 am- 11:00 am at the MCL Offices: 175 N. Redwood Blvd. Suite 135

All are welcome. Add your voice!

Visit [conservationleague.org/about-us/issue-committees.com](http://conservationleague.org/about-us/issue-committees.com) for agendas, minutes, and scheduled speakers.



## MCL Board Actions: In recent weeks, the MCL Board has taken action on two important issues that will come before voters in March 2020:

### **SUPPORT: Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority and Parcel Tax**

With the continuing threat of wildfire comes the recognition that effective fire preparedness, prevention, and response warrants enhanced coordination and governance among Marin County's fire agencies and municipalities. Building on FireSafe Marin and Marin's "Community Wildfire Protection Plan," a coalition of fire agencies, emergency response providers, and municipalities is advancing an initiative to create a Marin Authority Wildfire Prevention joint powers authority (JPA), funded by a parcel tax. If approved by a 2/3 vote, the JPA will cross jurisdictional boundaries and engage the entire community in an effort to improve emergency preparedness and evacuation; educate property owners on "hardening" their structures and creating defensible space; fund local projects; and, in general, create a better coordinated county-wide wildfire preparedness program. The JPA would be funded by a county-wide parcel assessment based on \$.10 per square feet of structure, yielding about \$21 M a year.

MCL has joined others to support the initiative but is also working to ensure that ecological values of vegetation, such as soil and water management, habitat, and climate resilience will be integrated into defensible space vegetation treatments in JPA programs. MCL will continue to monitor the initiative and provide a more detailed analysis as we near the March 2020 election.

### **OPPOSE: "Initiative Measure Preventing the County from Changing the Primary Golf Course Use of San Geronimo Valley Golf Course Without Voter approval"**

The coalition of golfers and their supporters who opposed acquisition of the golf course by Trust for Public Lands for eventual transfer to the county were successful in their drive to place an initiative on the ballot with the intention of limiting use of the property to golf. In reality, the initiative cannot force a private property owner (TPL) to operate a golf course. (See this Newsletter, Page 1). The measure would, however, constrain the owner from proposing other uses favored by the community without going to county-wide vote.

This amounts to land use planning at the ballot box. The unprecedented initiative could also expose actions under other community plans (28 in the county) to similar county-wide referenda. MCL is contributing to the campaign to defeat this badly conceived initiative and will present a more detailed analysis in the January Newsletter. In the meantime, MCL is tracking TPL's visionary planning process for the property with great interest.

MCL welcomed two new Directors to the Board at the Annual Meeting on April 5. We are pleased to introduce them in these pages.



### Bob Berner

Bob served as Executive Director of Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) for 28 years from 1984 until he retired in 2012. Prior to MALT, he was Executive Director of San Francisco Heritage (formerly, The Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage), and Vice-President, Director of Finance for the Nature Conservancy. He currently serves as a member of the Marin County Measure A Community Oversight Committee. Bob previously served on the MCL Board from 1993 - 1999. He was awarded the Peter Behr Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013 and the Marin Green Award in 2009.



### Mike Swezy

Mike recently retired as the Watershed Manager after a 23 year career with Marin Municipal Water District protecting watershed lands on Mt. Tamalpais and West Marin. Prior to MMWD, Mike worked as an ecologist for California State Parks and in the early 80's helped create Marin Conservation Corps (now Conservation Corp North Bay). Mike is a fire ecologist and served on the Board Directors of FIRESafe Marin for ten years and is now Co-Chair of MCL's Fire and Environment Working Group. In 2014, he was awarded MCL's Green Award for Environmental Leadership for efforts to create the Tamalpais Lands Collaborative, aka One Tam.

## San Geronimo Valley *from page 1*

property. The prior owner of the former golf course put the property up for sale in 2017. Under an agreement with Marin County, TPL purchased the property in January 2018, with the intent of phasing out golf for a more natural landscape that the county would ultimately purchase. In the interim Marin County would lease the property from TPL to continue golf operations for two years, anticipating acquisition and planning for its future uses. A lawsuit left the County with no option except to terminate the lease and golf operations in December 2018, leaving TPL as the property's owner, manager, and architect for its future, in the face of continuing controversy.

The October Open House was not the first time that TPL has engaged the public in reimagining the future of the property. Since engaging a small team of consultants in early 2019, TPL has met with local stakeholders in focused group meetings and in one-on-one conversations. TPL has also led small group tours of the property to encourage community leaders from across a spectrum of interests to meet each other, learn more about the property, hear from experts about pending habitat restoration on San Geronimo Creek and opportunities for the "back nine," and gather input.

At a recent small group tour, a representative from Trout Unlimited, TPL's partner for endangered fish conservation, and restoration engineer with ESA, outlined scenarios for restoring the hydrology and habitats of San Geronimo and Larsen Creeks. A County Fire Department captain, who described how the property is being managed for fire protection.

### Questions raised

For many who live in the Valley or drive by, the property has been something of a mystery since its transition to new owners – a mystery complicated by two years of claims and counterclaims, information and misinformation. In the meantime, TPL has encouraged people on foot or on bike, with or without dogs, to enjoy the property for passive recreation (no horses at present).

To assure the community that the property is fire-safe and can serve as a staging area

for first responders, TPL's property manager is mowing the grounds in accordance with Marin County Fire Department standards – four inches near structures, and six inches in open areas. A few aging trees, planted on the property many decades ago, have fallen and will be removed. Irrigation is limited to the immediate landscape around the clubhouse.

In response to the frequent inquiry – what about the return of golf on the property? – TPL is very clear: Golf is not central to its mission nor does TPL intend to support a golf course on this property. Nevertheless, TPL met extensively in 2018 with golf advocates, investors and other experts in the industry to explore the potential for on-going golf on the property but could find no financially viable path for the short- or long term that would also enable TPL to recover its investment in the property and also deliver on its conservation mission. A small 9-hole configuration would face financial constraints similar to those of a full 18-hole course.

### What do people want? Next steps

The many stakeholders who care about the property range widely in their own visions for its future: immediate neighbors appreciate having access; all neighbors are interested in fire safety and emergency preparedness; parents envision a safe routes to school across the property; and varied interests are promoting recreation, education, conservation, regenerative agriculture and the community garden, environmental stewardship, indigenous communities, wastewater recycling, affordable housing, and a new firehouse.

These ideas will play out in the months to come as TPL continues to reimagine the future for what one local observer called "an outdoor community living room." From



Mona Dennis

*The Trust for Public Land will fully engage the public in the planning process.*

a regional perspective, the property links to over 100,000 acres of contiguous public open space on all sides of the Valley and links up trails from the Valley to points as distant as the Golden Gate Bridge to the south and Point Reyes National Seashore to the west.

### What about the ballot measure in March 2020?

A petition to amend the San Geronimo Community Plan, requiring that the property be limited to a golf course was circulated and qualified for the March 2020 ballot. According to the initiative, any other proposed use would require a county-wide vote. Although its intent was to limit the use to golf, in fact, the measure would not force a private landowner to operate a golf course on the property. Instead, the ill-conceived measure could limit other uses that are under consideration, such as a new fire station and a revitalized clubhouse. In subjecting the San Geronimo Community Plan to a county-wide referendum if any uses other than golf are proposed, the measure, if approved, could set a precedent of undermining local control over any of the other 27 community plans around the county.

This Newsletter will discuss the ballot measure in some detail early in 2020. MCL is engaged in the campaign to counter the false claims of the petitioners and to defeat the measure. The clear message: the ballot measure must be defeated.

## Newts *from page 1*

moist soil or beneath rocks from their main predator, the common garter snake, which has genetic resistance to the toxin secreted by the newts' skin glands.

Responding to moisture in the air in late fall, the newts make their way to ponds, lakes, creeks and other wet areas, typically, the places in which they hatched. Males reach the breeding site several weeks ahead of the females. According to one description, the newts cluster into mating balls, with multiple males each trying to grasp a female. Once a male wins a female, he swims away with her, leaving the rest of the males to search for another available female. **During a mating dance**, the male climbs onto the back of the female, clasps her tightly, rubs his chin over her nose, flutters his tail, and strokes her cloaca. After about an hour the male deposits his spermatophore on the substrate. The female moves over it and picks it up with her cloaca. She carries it to a suitable spot to fertilize and lay her eggs.



*Planned crossing signs, like the one above, will warn drivers of active newt migration areas in West Marin.*

Over several days she will lay three to six spherical egg sacs which she attaches to underwater rocks or plants. Each egg sac contains from seven to about forty eggs. Larvae usually hatch after 14–21 days or longer, depending on food availability and temperature of the water—the colder the water, the longer the incubation. Newt larvae resemble tadpoles with legs. They are pale yellow and have two dark bands on their backs. They metamorphose into adults in three to six weeks. At the end of the season, females generally leave the pond before the males.

### *Hazards of crossing the road*

Laguna Lake is a large natural lake in the agricultural lands of West Marin. It is bordered by Chileno Valley road, which separates the newts and the leaf littered, shady hillside where they spend much of the year from the Lake. When the weather turns humid and drizzly in the fall, the slow moving newts venture onto the road, putting themselves in mortal danger from passing cars and trucks.

Some agencies in the Bay Area, like East Bay Regional Parks, have taken the newt migration seriously enough to institute temporary road closures. Another simple, low-cost solution in the event roads can't be closed is to have volunteers pick up the newts (with gloved hands, to avoid contact with the toxin). This was the simple goal of the Chileno Valley Newt Brigade as it began its training sessions in October. Using the app I-Naturalist, the volunteers will photograph the newts before picking them up, and log the time, date, direction, and weather. Collecting this information will make it easier to help newts cross the road in the future in their determination to reproduce.

It may not be too late to join the Brigade. Contact Sally Gale at [sallylgale@gmail.com](mailto:sallylgale@gmail.com) to sign up.

## *COSTCO in Northgate Mall?*

The proposed Costco at Northgate Mall in San Rafael to replace the closed Sears store has many people concerned about size and the compatibility of the proposal with visions for the future mall. MCL has reviewed the Pre-Application and Conceptual Design Review applications and suspects the land use changes, especially those related to the proposed gas station, may have potentially significant impacts on the natural environment and on the North San Rafael surrounding communities. For that reason, MCL is urging the city to prepare a CEQA document that examines impacts under a full suite of CEQA topics in Appendix G of the Guidelines, such as air and water quality, traffic and transportation, and land use. Considering the nature of a warehouse store ("big box") and its associated gas pumps, and its location in close proximity to residential neighborhoods, we believe that an EIR is required. MCL intends to actively participate in review of this project as it moves forward.



### *Did you know?*

You can set up an automated annual, quarterly, or monthly **donation** to Marin Conservation League via the MCL website? Schedule your gift at [www.marinconservationleague.org](http://www.marinconservationleague.org) and you will no longer receive paper renewal letters!

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*Board of Directors meetings are held at 7:00 PM on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of the month at the MCL office and are open to the public.*

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**Issue Committee Meeting Schedule  
(subject to change—check website)**

*Land Use and Transportation:*

1<sup>st</sup> Wed. of the month, 9:00–11:00 AM

*Parks and Open Space:*

2<sup>nd</sup> Thurs. of the month, 3:00–5:00 PM

*Fire and Environment Working Group:*

2<sup>nd</sup> Mon. of the month, 1:00 PM–3:00 PM

*Climate Action Working Group:* 3<sup>rd</sup> Fri. of

the month, 9:00 AM–11:00 AM

*Agricultural Land Use: meets quarterly;*

*Water and Watersheds, North Marin Unit:*

*Check website for times and locations*

Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect and enhance Marin County's natural assets. MCL is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. All contributions and memberships are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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Nona Dennis

MCL members joined in a One Tam celebration of the Autumnal Equinox on Mount Tamalpais, September 23, 2019.