Marin Conservation League NEWS

JULY–AUGUST 2004

WHERE WE STAND

Deeply Flawed Watershed Plan Needs Scientific, Public Input

The Marin County Open Space District's draft Watershed Management Plan is deeply flawed and needs to go back to the drawing board, according to MCL experts who were invited to review the administrative draft of the document.

We sent this message to the District in a June 21 letter, along with a detailed evaluation. MCL found that the draft plan doesn't address water quality mitigations; provides no implementation proposals; doesn't demonstrate how recommendations would support regulatory mandates for species protection, wetlands preservation, or water quality; fails to recognize negative agricultural impacts; and was created with no input from the public or scientific and environmental communities.

"It's the wrong approach for a serious watershed plan," says Kathy Cuneo, co-chair of MCL's Creeks, Wetlands, and Watersheds Committee. "Everyone involved in the watershed needs to be involved [in the plan]."

Plan Should Ensure Water Quality, Protect Resources

A watershed management plan is the blueprint for sound ecological management that ensures water quality and protects resources. It should be developed with public input and involve not only scientists, planners, and environmentalists but also those who live on or near watershed lands and use those resources.

Marin County, with its complex and diverse watershed ecosystems, needs a clear and comprehensive management plan that addresses the various needs and sets priorities for resource use and protection. Moreover, the water quality of a number of streams and bays, including Lagunitas and Corte Madera creeks and Richardson and Tomales bays, is impaired by excessive levels of pollutants. The county's ability to receive funds to remedy these problems will require a credible watershed management plan, our letter points out.

Local Councils Could Provide Vision, Strategy

The letter calls for the Marin County Community Development Agency to redraft the plan with appropriate input and scientific and technical review before it is incorporated into the Marin Countywide Plan.

In addition to detailing the rationale for a new plan, the MCL letter proposes that the county support and develop local watershed councils that would "provide a vision and strategies for developing each watershed plan, consistent with regulatory requirements and supported by science and technical experts."

MCL Endorses Transit Measure

MCL's board of directors unanimously endorsed the county ballot measure calling for a half-cent sales tax to fund transportation improvements. (See page 1, May-June 2004.) If approved in November, the measure is expected to generate about $19 million a year for projects that will relieve congestion, provide transit alternatives, increase funding for commuter transportation, and improve safety and relieve congestion in school areas. The measure needs a two-thirds majority vote to pass.

"This is better than any of the other transportation plans that have been on the ballot," says Don Wilhelm, chair of MCL's Transportation Committee. "It's absolutely necessary that we do something to provide congestion relief and improve mobility, or things are going to get a whole lot worse."

For more than a year, MCL has fought for a responsible plan that would provide adequate funding for timely completion of the HOV lane through San Rafael and for bus transit services. MCL's top priorities were ensuring that the money is wisely spent and that the plan can be amended only by a majority of Marin cities representing a majority of the county's citizens.

The final expenditure plan is available at www.marintraffic.org.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Watershed Rehab: Park Service plans to restore Giacomini Ranch land 3

Issue Watch: The latest on Tomales Bay, open space policies, and more 4

Nature Notes: Rare butterfly finds refuge on Point Reyes Seashore 4

Conservation Action: MCL advocates St. Vincent's/Silveira protection 5

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From the Executive Director

The Marin Conservation League Belongs to You

Dear members,

By now you've received MCL's 2003 annual report, celebrating our many successes in protecting Marin's natural assets. None of these accomplishments would have been possible without you: members' financial and grassroots support make it possible for MCL to be Marin's environmental watchdog.

As our membership grows and our programs expand, I'm committed to providing you with meaningful opportunities to engage in our conservation work and activities. Not only do we encourage you to join our committees and campaigns and to volunteer (see below), but we will soon be offering a series of field trips that will take you to the heart of some of Marin's most valuable natural systems and hottest controversies.

For example, we recently toured the incredible Tomales Dunes in west Marin—one of the county's biologically unique and most-threatened ecosystems (see page 3). Earlier in the year, we visited the Redwood Landfill to learn how the facility's proposed expansion would impact the environment. You won't want to miss the fantastic outings we're planning for fall, including a hiking tour of the salt marshes at China Camp State Park tentatively set for Oct. 24. We'll let you know the details when the date is confirmed.

One thing you don't have to wait for is MCL's first Picnic on the Porch, on Saturday, July 24. It's our birthday party, too, and I'd like you and your families to join me, our board, and your fellow conservationists at MCL's office from 4 to 7 p.m. to celebrate 70 years of conservation action. It's MCL's gift to you: there'll be plenty of food, fun, and—of course—birthday cake for everyone. See you there!

Sincerely,

J. Scott Feierabend
Executive Director

Make a Difference: Volunteer with MCL

Here are some easy ways you can help improve Marin's environment:

Represent MCL for Earth Share Get the word out about MCL as a presenter for Earth Share California, which raises much-needed funds for MCL and more than 80 other environmental organizations through workplace giving campaigns. Presenter trainings take place Aug. 21 and Sept. 1.

Get Involved with Parks Help track projects and programs, visit parks, and otherwise assist MCL's Parks and Open Space Committee. Current projects include proper trail use, restoration, fire protection, habitat conservation, and traffic congestion (yes, it's inescapable).

Learn the Lay of the Land Know your way around land use planning and development? Help us help track project enforcement—think of it as land use detective work. Flexible hours!

Hike While You Work We need a photographer with digital chops and a good eye to cover events and capture the landscape. We could also use help with cataloguing our photo files.

For details about these and other volunteer opportunities, contact us at (415) 485-6257 or mcl@marinconservationleague.org.

Save Trees! Help us keep you up-to-date on late-breaking events as well as save time, money, and natural resources: send your e-mail address to mcl@marinconservationleague.org. We will never sell or share your e-mail address.

Park Service Floats Plans for Wetlands Restoration

The National Park Service is moving ahead with plans to restore the Giacomini Ranch wetlands—563 acres lining the southern tip of Tomales Bay that rancher Waldo Giacomini diked in the 1940s to create pasture for cattle grazing. The Park Service announced restoration alternatives in late June; a final plan is expected in 2006.

"This is a very exciting project," says Kathy Cuneo, co-chair of MCL's Creeks, Wetlands, and Watersheds Committee. "It's something that we never thought would happen in our lifetime."

The project is significant: full restoration would increase the wetlands of central California by 12 percent. In addition, the area is home to threatened and endangered species, including the tidewater goby, California red-legged frog, and clapper rail.

The Park Service believes the restoration will improve their habitat and is likely to improve the health of the Tomales Bay watershed ecosystem: improving wetlands functions improves water quality, which would benefit the bay's oyster fisheries and animals such as gray whales, harbor seals, and brown pelicans. The land has changed greatly in the past 50 years. It is heavily diked and channeled, and the flow of its creeks (Lagunitas in the middle and Tomasini along the eastern edge) is controlled—Tomasini no longer flows along its historic route. About half the land is nonnative grassland, and the rest is a mixture of fresh- and saltwater marsh.

A Return to Natural Balance

The Park Service's stated goal is to return the land to its natural balance by improving the process and function of the area as wetlands habitat. The alternatives presented on June 22 range from a minimal plan that does little more than maintain the land's current state (and allows for continued cattle grazing) to a complete restoration program that would bring it as close to its original state as possible.

Two alternatives include Olema Marsh in the restoration; the marsh is owned by Audubon Canyon Ranch and separated from the Giacomini wetlands by a levee, road, and higher elevation. All proposals provide some degree of public access, and this may be one source of contention as the environmental impact statement and report are developed. Environmental groups oppose a multiuse trail through the wetlands and will work to ensure that trails have minimal impacts.

Cuneo thinks Alternative C, the second most extensive plan, makes the most sense. It proposes removing levees along the east and west sides, creating a freshwater marsh on the east, revegetating significant sections with native plants, rerouting Tomasini Creek into a portion of its historic route, and widening the Bear Valley Creek connection between the Giacomini land and Olema Marsh to improve conditions for salmon.

'This is a very exciting project. It's something that we never thought would happen in our lifetime.'

"It seems to be the one that delivers the most bang for the buck," Cuneo says. Other alternatives don't go quite far enough, and the most extensive alternative is likely to incur significant costs that deliver little added benefit.

The Park Service purchased the land in February 2000 with the goal of restoring it and currently manages 100 acres. The rest, which will revert to Park Service control in 2007, is a working ranch operated by the Giacomini family. The next step is to create the environmental report and statement, due in 2005; restoration work may begin as early as 2006.

MCL Field Trip: Dunes in Danger

MCL members recently toured Tomales Dunes, central California's largest unprotected dunes system. Peter Baye, a botanist and expert in dunes ecology and San Francisco Bay ecosystems, led the trip along with his dog, Chewy.

The dunes are home to at least 16 rare, threatened, or endangered species, such as the endangered California brown pelican, American peregrine falcon, and the wooly-headed spineflower. In fact, the entire 960-acre ecosystem is threatened by the invasion of nonnative European beach grass and ice plant, recreational overuse, and sand quarrying.

Issue Watch

No Drive-In Camping at Tomales Bay State Park

As MCL recommended, the California Department of Parks and Recreation has backed down from including drive-in camping in its draft general plan for Tomales Bay State Park. However, the department is still considering adding a 15-site campground at Heart's Desire, recreational facilities, and connector trails; developing portions of the waterfront; and implementing other measures that MCL believes will increase visitor access at the expense of environmental protections. (See page 1, May-June 2004.) The preliminary general plan, draft environmental impact report, public comments, responses, and plan revisions are posted at: www.parks.ca.gov/default.asp?page_id=470.

Open Space District Addresses 'Special Status' Species

The Marin County Open Space District said it will incorporate a comprehensive policy on "special status" species in its new management policies—going beyond the original proposal, which MCL endorsed and which would have covered only endangered species. The special status designation covers the range of state and federal designations: endangered, threatened, of special concern, and rare.

The change is a result of the District's ongoing review and revision of its 30-year-old policies. MCL is monitoring the process to make sure that any changes strengthen the District's core mission to manage Open Space lands primarily for resource protection. MCL's recommendations include restricting recreational development, avoiding concentrated trailheads, and adding policies on endangered species and nonnative plants and animals. (See page 5, May-June 2004.)

The remaining policy review workshops are scheduled for August 11 and September 8. For details, go to: www.marinopenspace.org/os_initiative.asp.

Responsible Land Use Needed at San Quentin

MCL continues to push for environmental accountability in potential development of San Quentin if the prison is closed. The latest draft Countywide Plan envisions the site as a high-density development that includes commercial and residential buildings and a transportation center. MCL asked the Planning Commission in late June to provide an environmental impact analysis for the site in the draft plan or to delete references to San Quentin entirely.

Cascade Canyon/White Hills EIR

Overuse of the preserves, illegal biking, and fire protection for surrounding communities are among the concerns that led the Marin County Open Space District to draft a land management plan and draft environmental impact report for the Cascade Canyon and White Hills preserves west of Fairfax. MCL has completed a preliminary review of the report and asked the District to better address the effects of proposed firebreaks, control of French broom, illegal trails, and parking problems.

Public comments on the EIR draft were due July 9. To read the report, go to www.marinopenspace.org.

MCL Gets the Lead Out (of Landfills)

MCL helped recycle 86 vehicle batteries during the Great Battery Roundup, sponsored by AAA of Northern California in April.

This program keeps lead, sulfuric acid, and plastics out of landfills while helping environmental organizations, which receive $2 per battery collected at designated sites. MCL partnered with Greenbridge Gas & Auto in Point Reyes, R&G Toyota in San Rafael, and Novato Toyota to collect batteries.

AAA of Northern California collected 4,560 batteries this year. AAA began the program nationally in 2000 in conjunction with Earth Day to encourage people to recycle car, motorcycle, and boat batteries; they are 99 percent recyclable, yet 5 million wind up in the nation's dumps each year.

For information go to www.batteryroundup.com.

NATURE NOTES

Point Reyes Rarity: Silverspot Butterfly

By Sarah Allen

Tule elk and pocket gophers are among the animals we commonly associate with the coastal prairies of western Point Reyes, but they share portions of their rich habitat with a much rarer species: the Myrtle's silverspot butterfly.

Myrtle's silverspot is golden brown with a 2-inch wingspan. The wings are marked with black spots and lines on top, and the eponymous silver spots on the pale undersides.

This butterfly once ranged along the coast from Sonoma County to Point Año Nuevo in San Mateo County, but it hasn't been seen south of the Golden Gate since the 1970s. Today, two of the three remaining populations are on Point Reyes National Seashore, in the tule elk range in the north and in the bluffs and grasslands above Drake's Beach.

Endangered Species The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed *Speyeria zerene myrtlea* as endangered in 1992; only about 10,000 are thought to remain. The primary reasons for the subspecies' decline are a constriction of its range due to urban development, cattle grazing on native coastal prairie, and invasion of nonnative plants.

These threats are severe because Myrtle's silverspot depends on the coastal prairie's rare plants: It lays its eggs on or near western dog violet; the caterpillars feed on the host plant in the spring until forming a pupa in a chamber of leaves. When the adults emerge in late June or early July they feed on the nectar of gumplant, yellow sand verbena, mints, bull thistle, and seaside daisy. Adults live up to three weeks.

Environmental Sentinels Due to their restricted habitat requirements, *Speyeria* butterflies are excellent indicator species for monitoring environmental changes. The Center for Conservation Biology at Stanford and Point Reyes National Seashore have monitored the Myrtle's silverspot since 1994, and found that although the population has waned, butterflies were seen in new locations in other remnant coastal prairies of the Seashore.

continued on page 5

CONSERVATION ACTION

St. Vincent's/Silveira Needs Full Protection

Environmental leaders say Marin's 2004 Draft Countywide Plan (CWP) should fully protect the St. Vincent's School/Silveira Ranch properties north of San Rafael to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural resources and prevent building on the 100-year floodplain.

MCL asked the Planning Commission in a June 25 letter to follow the recommendation in the 2003 *Community Marin* report, which states that the best environmental option is to preserve the lands in their entirety. If development does occur, MCL wants the county to ensure that the CWP will limit and cluster development to avoid sensitive habitats, protect cultural and historic resources, prohibit intensified agricultural use that might compromise wildlife, and preserve the ranch and Miller Creek floodplain.

The draft CWP provides some protection for the lands and promotes a less extensive Baylands Corridor, but it would not guarantee the best protection for this unique Bay ecosystem.

Maintain Baylands Ecosystem To ensure these protections, the county should extend the proposed Baylands Corridor in the St. Vincent's School/Silveira area west to Highway 101, preserving the baylands ecosystem as an integrated whole and providing a practical boundary for planning and regulatory purposes.

The *Community Marin* report, which is serving as an environmental guide for the Countywide Plan, originally proposed a Baylands Protection Corridor that would encompass lands that "provide habitat for Bay-related wildlife species." The county has partially adopted this concept. However, to ensure species diversity and fully protect interconnected habitats, the Corridor should also include the adjacent uplands.

Ensure Species Habitat As *Community Marin* states, "many wildlife species require adjacent uplands and non-tidal wetlands to survive…. [therefore] adjacent native oak woodlands, such as occur at St. Vincent's, Bahia and Black Point, grasslands, and floodplains should also be included."

Extending the Baylands Corridor designation to Highway 101, MCL states in its letter, would better implement the CWP protective policies proposed for these lands and would not preclude limited development at St. Vincent's.

Environmental Community Gains a Voice

Environmentalists now have a voice in helping solve the traffic problems in the parks and communities of southwest Marin, thanks to pressure from MCL.

MCL member Gordon Bennett is representing the environmental community on the Marin Advisory Council of the Comprehensive Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) for Parklands in Southwestern Marin. While surrounding communities and governmental agencies have been involved in the project from the start, no environmental group had representation until MCL requested it.

The CTMP seeks to remedy traffic congestion and explore transportation alternatives around Muir Woods National Monument, Tennessee Valley, Muir Beach, Stinson Beach, and Mt. Tamalpais State Park. A key goal is to reduce traffic impacts on surrounding communities as well as in the parks.

Concerns Raised Some concerns raised include reducing congestion, not merely prohibiting its growth; ensuring adequate protection for natural resources; and eliminating illegal parking on roadsides.

The last two public workshops are scheduled for July 17 and Sept. 11 and will cover proposed alternative plans. Draft transportation plans and environmental impact documents are due in spring 2005; the plan is expected to be final in fall 2006.

For information go to: www.ctmpmarin.com.

Silverspot Butterfly

continued from page 4

Photo by Geoff Smick, National Park Service

Myrtle's silverspot butterflies at Point Reyes inhabit land grazed by cattle or Tule elk. Although grazing probably depletes the violets upon which the subspecies depends, some grazing helps the plants by reducing the spread of nonnative species.

Restoring Habitat Is Key The key to survival for the Myrtle's silverspot may be preserving remnant patches of native coastal dune and prairie and restoring degraded habitats through techniques such as mowing, prescribed fire, and altered grazing regimes.

MCL board member Sarah Allen is a senior scientist with the National Park Service at Point Reyes National Seashore.

Committee Meetings

Meetings are held monthly at the MCL office in San Rafael.

Creeks, Wetlands & Watersheds
Meets third Thursday at 4 p.m.
Chair: Kathy Cuneo

Land Use
Meets first Wednesday at 8 a.m.
Chair: Don Dickenson

Parks & Open Space
Meets first Thursday at 3 p.m.
Chair: Jean Berensmeier

Transportation
Meets second Friday at 8 a.m.
Chair: Don Wilhelm

Water Resources
Meets third Thursday at noon
Chair: Tim Rosenfeld

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Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect, and enhance Marin County's natural assets.

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Our board of directors and issue committees meet monthly. Meetings are open to the public. We welcome your membership and participation.

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NEWS
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Our Lasting Legacy

Saving Angel Island: MCL Led the Way

Angel Island State Park is priceless. A detention and interrogation center for about a quarter-million Chinese seeking to immigrate to the United States between 1910 and 1940, the scenic 740-acre island just off Sausalito is now popular with day hikers and picnickers, and its walk-in campsites are reserved months in advance.

But the island didn't easily come into public hands. In the late 1940s, when the U.S. government declared Angel Island surplus property, MCL led the charge to save it, first by paying for fire and police protection to buy time and then by fundraising and negotiating to make it a state park. Success came in 1954, and in 1958, its mountaintop was christened Mt. Caroline Livermore to honor MCL's founder, who—at age 70—led the campaign.

The site recently needed rescue again: in 1999 the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the island's immigration station—falling in ruins—one of America's 11 most endangered historic places. The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) is now working with state and federal park services to restore the National Historic Landmark site, and U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Sonoma, introduced legislation May 20 that would allow federal funds to support the project.

For more on restoration efforts, go to the AIISF site at www.aiisf.org.

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Join Us July 24!

We're firing up the grills and blowing up the balloons for our first Picnic on the Porch, celebrating 70 years of conservation action, from 4 to 7 p.m. Saturday, July 24.

Just whet your appetite, round up the kids, and come on over to MCL in historic San Rafael. Naturally, there'll be birthday cake and traditional picnic fare, plus door prizes and a used book sale featuring plenty of nature titles. Please let us know if you plan to attend: call (415) 485-6257 or e-mail mcl@marinconservationleague.org.