Marin Conservation League NEWS

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2004

WHERE WE STAND

MCL Advocates Affordable Housing in Developed Areas

Providing affordable housing and preserving our natural resources are both high priorities for Marin, and sometimes housing advocates and environmentalists land on opposite sides of a proposal, as we have on the call to develop St. Vincent's/Silveira. We are not, however, on opposite sides of the affordable housing issue.

MCL believes that Marin can build affordable housing without damaging the environment or lessening Marin citizens' quality of life. Affordable housing—indeed, any housing—should be provided in established communities and existing developed areas close to transportation, services, and shopping. This will control urban sprawl, limit further traffic congestion, and protect and preserve natural resources and habitat diversity.

"It needs to be in the right location, preferably redeveloping existing sites," says MCL President Jana Haehl. "We believe that reuse and conversion of selected sites with appropriate infill offers opportunities for significant gains in affordable housing stock without sacrificing greenfields."

MCL Supports Varied Projects Throughout Marin

MCL supports developments that meet these standards. Within the past two years, we have supported a number of affordable housing projects: Redwood Village (formerly known as Rafael Meadows) in San Rafael, a high-density, 132-unit project that will provide 20 percent of its units at below-market rates; the Ecumenical Association for Housing (EAH) project in Corte Madera; the 50-unit housing project for seniors and families to be built on the site of the old Fireside Motel in Mill Valley; and the Drake Way development in Larkspur, an EAH project that will provide all 26 units at below-market rates.

We do not, however, support significant housing development on the site of St. Vincent's/Silveira north of San Rafael. Not only is the site a valuable ecosystem, the properties are far from transportation and services and lack appropriate infill development. We believe the best option is for the county to give the area full environmental protection in the Countywide Plan (see "St. Vincent's/Silveira Needs Full Protection" on page 5 of the July-August issue for details).

St. Vincent's/Silveira Proposal Poses Serious Problems

If development is allowed, we believe the county should limit and cluster it, prohibit intensified agricultural use, and preserve the ranch and Miller Creek floodplain. The current draft Countywide Plan limits development to 220 homes, plus 100 units of affordable housing, on 5 percent of the land. Affordable housing advocates, however, are calling for up to 1,800 housing units.

continued on page 5

District Plans Test Desalination Plant

The Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD) gave the go-ahead in late July for testing a pilot desalination plant that will provide vital information about the viability and environmental impacts of using San Francisco Bay water to help meet Marin's water needs, especially during droughts.

The temporary, small-scale plant will use slow-moving pumps to pull water from the bay via large pipes, probably at the Marin Rod and Gun Club. MMWD will test the reverse osmosis process that removes the salt and toxins as well as pretreatment technologies that filter out the sludge and silt. The cost to set up and run the pilot plant for one year is estimated at $1.2 million.

Process Could Be Drought Option

MCL believes water conservation is the best option for maintaining supply but is studying whether desalination is a viable option in times of drought and to replace the expected loss of water from the Russian River, currently the source of 24 percent of MMWD's supply. The proposed

continued on page 4

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Marin on the Web: MCL's guide to the most useful open space, park, and natural resources sites 3

Issue Watch: The latest on Giacomini Ranch restoration plans and San Rafael's general plan 4

Nature Notes: Marin's salt marshes nurture abundant wildlife 4

Conservation Action: MCL weighs in on the Countywide Plan's treatment of water resource issues 5

MCL BOARD 2004–2005

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President
Jana Haehl
Corte Madera

First Vice President
Kathy Lowrey
Fairfax

Second Vice President
Nona Dennis
Mill Valley

Secretary
Susan Stompe
Novato

Treasurer
Ken Drexler
Fairfax

BOARD MEMBERS

Sarah Allen
Fairfax

Charles Brousse
Greenbrae

Catherine Caufield
Pt. Reyes Station

Kathy Cuneo
San Rafael

Don Dickenson
San Rafael

Robin Kohn Glazer
Mill Valley

Randy Greenberg
Tiburon

Brannon Ketcham
Fairfax

Charles McGlashan
Mill Valley

Roger Roberts
San Rafael

Tim Rosenfeld
Mill Valley

Lawrence Smith
Nicasio

Jean Starkweather
San Rafael

David Weinsoff
Fairfax

From the Executive Director

Walking the Talk: Staying True to MCL's Principles

"Talk is cheap," as the old adage says, and many of you probably know organizations that set lofty and admirable goals that make for a nice office wall hanging but amount to little else. At MCL, we're committed to walking the talk laid out in our recently adopted strategic plan, which establishes six principles that articulate our organization's fundamental values and guide our approach to issues:

- Give environmental concerns first priority.
- Be scientifically credible, employing the best available information in developing policies and positions.
- Be creative and responsive in pursuing opportunities for action.
- Encourage people and communities to practice environmentally responsible behaviors.
- When common goals allow, forge partnerships and be open to diverse means to accomplish them.
- Advocate for environmental interests aggressively, and be tenacious and passionate in carrying forward the MCL legacy.

Here's an example of how we're acting on these principles:

The Marin Municipal Water District is evaluating the merits of constructing a desalination plant to address the county's need for sustainable water resources (see story, page 1). A host of issues are at play in the debate on this project, including the environmental consequences of the plant, energy supply, the role of water conservation, and urban sprawl. Enter MCL's commitment to scientifically based action, our second guiding principle. Because the jury is still out on many potential environmental impacts, MCL has not yet taken a position on the issue. MCL's approach is to keep our powder dry, conduct a dispassionate review of the data, and then establish a firm, fact-based position. At that point, we will follow our sixth guiding principle and advocate for our position aggressively, tenaciously, and passionately.

Staying true to our principles is the only course of action for an organization whose credibility is everything and whose members expect nothing less. I'll continue to keep you updated on how we're walking our talk.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Feierabend
Executive Director

P.S. I'll soon be asking you to renew your MCL membership for 2005. Please be sure to renew right away so that we can put your membership dollars to work immediately in fighting to protect and preserve Marin's spectacular environment!

Leave a Legacy: Make a Bequest to MCL

Want to make the world a better place? A bequest to MCL can be part of your legacy—it's an easy way to make sure the things you love about Marin not only remain but continue to improve and grow.

Consider these ways to support MCL: 1) Include a gift to MCL in your will; 2) Name MCL as a beneficiary on your retirement plan; 3) Make a special donation to MCL.

For more information on these options, call Executive Director Scott Feierabend at (415) 485-6257. MCL is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, so gifts are tax deductible.

A Click Away: MCL's Guide to Marin Web Resources

There's a wealth of information on the Web about Marin's open spaces, parks, and natural resources as well as the agencies that oversee them—you just have to know where to look. Here's a short guide to some of the county's most useful Web sites.

Parks and Open Space

Marin County Open Space District (www.marinopenspace.org)

This is a terrific site. The home page links to up-to-date sections on major policy issues and a fabulous interactive map: just click an open space area and a page pops up that tells you all about it. The eNature database of flora and fauna tells you about the species in each preserve and throughout Marin, complete with photos and audio clips of birdcalls.

California Parks (www.parks.ca.gov)

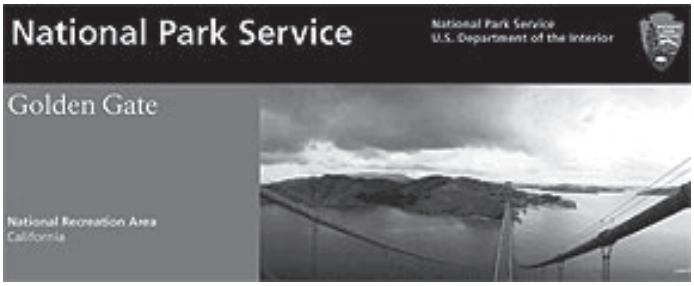
Marin County boasts seven state parks: Angel Island, China Camp, Marconi Conference Center, Mt. Tamalpais, Oolompali, Samuel P. Taylor, and Tomales Bay. The easiest way to access them without bookmarking each one is to go to the state parks home page and use the Find a Park search feature. This also gives you access to information and news about all parks—for instance, the 2004 California State Parks Performance Management Report.

Point Reyes National Seashore (www.nps.gov/pore)

This National Park Service site is rich with information, and most of it's easy to find. In addition to information for casual visitors, you'll find management documents such as draft environmental impact reports, details about ongoing research, and extensive information about wildlife and plants. The site is well worth a look, even if you've been visiting Point Reyes for years. (Other park events and opportunities are at the Point Reyes National Seashore Association site, www.ptreyes.org.)

Golden Gate National Recreation Area (www.nps.gov/goga)

The GGNRA Web site and related pages are a bit harder to navigate than the Point Reyes site, but that's largely because the GGNRA includes so many park areas. In Marin, these include Muir Woods and the Marin Headlands. The GGNRA's supporting association is the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, www.parksconservancy.org.



Marin Parks and Government Web Sites

California Parks **www.parks.ca.gov**
Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy **www.parksconservancy.org**
Golden Gate National Recreation Area **www.nps.gov/goga**
Marin County **www.co.marin.ca.us**
Marin County Open Space District **www.marinopenspace.org**
Marin Municipal Water District **www.marinwater.org**
North Marin Water District **www.nmwd.com**
Point Reyes National Seashore **www.nps.gov/pore**
Point Reyes National Seashore Association **www.ptreyes.org**
Transportation Authority of Marin **www.marintraffic.org**

Live links for these resources are on MCL's home page at: ***www.marinconservationleague.org.***

Government and Agencies

Marin County (www.co.marin.ca.us)

The Marin County government site is large and can be difficult to navigate—for instance, to research the Countywide Plan you need to know that it's administered by the Community Development Agency. But once you find what you're looking for, you can sign up for e-mail alerts about issues, commission and board of supervisors meetings, and more, and create your own index of links with the My Marin feature.

Marin Municipal Water District (www.marinwater.org)

This easy-to-navigate site is a resource for learning about how Marin gets its water, the Mt. Tamalpais watershed, water quality, and the proposed desalination project (see page 1 of this newsletter for details), though it is sometimes a bit short on hard facts. It provides excellent water conservation tips and tells you all about MMWD conservation programs—one great resource is Water Watch, which compares water usage from 1999 until now.

North Marin Water District (www.nmwd.com)

The NMWD site provides information similar to what the MMWD site provides—water quality statistics, where the water comes from, conservation tips and programs, and so on—geared for the North Marin district.

Transportation Authority of Marin (www.marintraffic.org)

This is the home base for Marin's Sales Tax Expenditure Plan for this November's sales tax ballot measure. You can download a copy of the plan and follow its history and development through meeting minutes; the truly dedicated can use the site links to city and town councils to see how each body voted to get the measure on the ballot.

Issue Watch

MCL Endorses Giacomini Restoration Alternative

MCL has officially endorsed the Point Reyes National Seashore's Alternative C for the Giacomini Ranch wetlands restoration project. This is the second most extensive plan for restoring the 563 acres, which have been progressively diked since midcentury and now are mostly used for cattle grazing (see page 3 of the July-August issue for details about the project).

The Seashore is looking at public-access options, including bicycle paths, as part of the restoration. MCL, in a letter to Seashore Superintendent Don Neubacher, opposed proposed bike paths through the restored wetlands or along the railroad levee because they would compromise habitat.

For information about the project, go to: www.nps.gov/pore/home_mngmnt-docs_giacomini.htm.

San Rafael's General Plan Goes to City Council

The San Rafael Planning Commission has completed its review of recommended changes to the city's draft general plan and was scheduled to send the revised plan to the City Council and certify the final environmental impact report on Aug. 24. MCL has praised the draft plan for recognizing the importance of the 85-acre Canalways wetlands as a "high-value resource." (See page 5 of the May-June issue for background.) City Council hearings are likely to begin in September; the plan is expected to be approved in early 2005. For information go to: www.cityofsanrafael.org/generalplan.

Water District Plans Desalination Plant Test

continued from page 1

desalination plant could provide 5 million to 15 million gallons of water annually at a cost of $1,300 per acre-foot of water, comparable to the cost of a new pipeline.

The proposed plan for handling the by-products of a large-scale plant is to mix the brine with treated wastewater from the Central Marin Sanitation Agency and discharge it back into the bay. The sludge and silt filtered from the water would be hauled to the Redwood Landfill.

The technology isn't without downsides that must be addressed. For one, it uses a lot of electricity, which would most likely be imported and is vulnerable to price hikes and outages. Desalination also poses potential threats to the bay environment: The intakes might kill small marine life, and the impacts of the brine-wastewater mixture on the bay's water quality and habitat are unknown.

Test Data Will Inform EIR The test plant will allow MMWD to gather data on potential threats and incorporate it into the environmental impact report for the full-scale desalination plant; the EIR is expected to be completed in spring 2005. The test plant will also allow MMWD to assess different pretreatment technologies and determine how well the plant will screen out solids, preventing clogging of the reverse osmosis membranes. MMWD plans to run the pilot plant for nine months so it covers two seasonal variations in the bay: winter, when the water is very silty and fresh, and late summer, when the water is most salty.

MMWD probably will formally approve the pilot plant in October, and it's tentatively slated to begin operation in November. MMWD has background information on the desalination project at: www.marinwater.org/whatsnew.html.

If you would like to be kept informed on this issue or help in our investigation, please send an e-mail to mcl@marinconservationleague.org.

NATURE NOTES

Salt Marsh: A Vital Marin Ecosystem

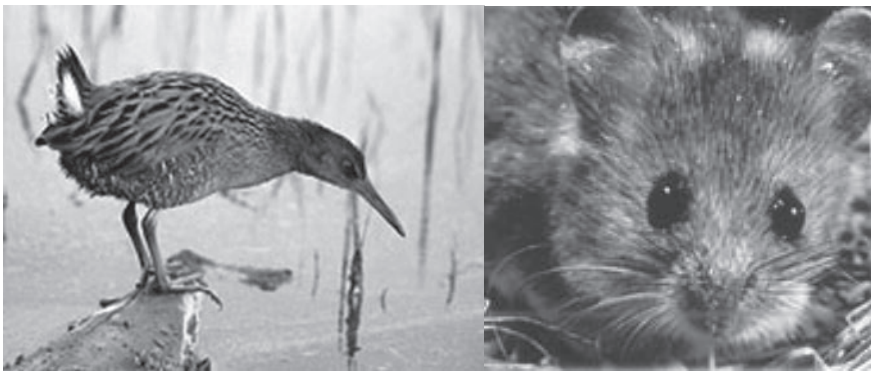
By Kathy Cuneo

Sheltered places where fresh water touches the edge of San Francisco Bay produce wonderful living communities called salt marshes. This vital ecosystem is a critical component of Marin baylands, serving as home and nursery to hundreds of fish and other marine life, birds, insects, and animals, including the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse and California clapper rail.

Salt marshes were formed by sediment washed from the gold-bearing hillsides of the Sierra more than 100 years ago. A marsh begins life when the sediment accumulates and is colonized by tall California cord grass, which forms broad bands at the water's edge. Other plants that can tolerate the salty water of San Francisco Bay soon invade the protected mud on the landward side of the cord grass: pickleweed, a small, bushy plant, moves in to cover the marsh surface and is joined by salt grass, fleshy jaumea, salt marsh rosemary, frankenia, and other plants. Salt marsh gum plant resides on the slightly higher edges of the sloughs that cross the marsh, bringing in the tidal water and draining the marsh plain.

A Rich Brew Each winter the green portions of cord grass and pickleweed above the sediment wither and die. Storms beat down the dead portions, which dissolve into the bay water to form a rich suspension of organic particles and nutrients. These contributions to the bay's watery ecosystem fill the open water, mud flats, and salt marshes with plentiful food for small organisms,

continued on page 5



The endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse depend on San Francisco Bay's salt marshes, which are a vital part of Marin's baylands.

Sustainability Should Guide Water Policy

MCL has asked the Marin County Planning Commission to adhere to its stated goal of sustainability in addressing water resource issues in the draft Countywide Plan.

In a June 24 letter, MCL asks the commission to amend the draft plan to provide data that explain the current state of water resource use and to describe what proposed policies and programs would achieve. Additionally, MCL believes that the draft plan does not place sufficient priority on conservation and that its discussion of increased demand for water does not include policies or regulatory measures that would offset that demand.

County Should Reduce Demand Among other recommendations, MCL asks that the draft plan state that the county is using more water, much of it wasted, than the local region can supply, and that the county should "reduce future demand below current demand even though there will be more development." MCL proposed a "zero-net increase" approach, which other communities have adopted, that requires new development to offset demand for water through efficient technology and programs that permanently reduce water use in existing buildings and landscapes.

Planning Commission hearings for public comment on the draft Countywide Plan will continue into the fall; the plan is expected to go to the Marin Board of Supervisors for approval in early 2005. For more information go to: www.future-marin.org.

Help Preserve 2,650 Acres of Bay Wetlands

MCL is contributing $2,000 to the Sonoma Land Trust's Baylands Campaign to preserve 2,650 acres of San Pablo Bay wetlands and open space just across the Petaluma River in Sonoma County.

Preserving this unique ecological system is critical for improving the health of the bay and providing vital habitat for hundreds of birds, plants, and animals. It will:

- Protect four miles of bay shoreline
- Ensure contiguous wetlands habitat from the Petaluma River east to Tolay Creek
- Help create a healthier bay by protecting watershed lands

The Trust has contracts to purchase the 650-acre Dickson Ranch and an adjacent 1,679 acres once destined to be a casino operated by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. Last fall the tribe turned its purchase option over to the Trust and promised to donate an additional 321 acres.

The cost of the land is $25 million, including some restoration. Most of this will come from federal, state, and local funding, but the Trust hopes to raise $2.5 million in private funds to complete the deal by the end of September.

We encourage you to join MCL in supporting this purchase. You may send contributions to the Baylands Campaign, Sonoma Land Trust, 966 Sonoma Ave., Santa Rosa, CA 95404. For more information, call (707) 526-6930 or go to: www.sonomalandtrust.org.

MCL Hosts Forum on GMOs in Marin

In November, Marin voters will decide whether to prohibit growing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the county. To help residents explore this controversial issue, MCL will host a Business Breakfast presentation, "Are There GMOs in My Cheerios?" in the last week of October.

GMO use on large-scale farms is growing. According to the American Corn Growers Association, more than half the soybean, 30 percent of corn, and 35 percent of cotton acres in the United States are planted in GMOs. If passed, the Marin ordinance would ban growing GMO crops in the county, except for medical research or treatment.

To receive confirmation of the program date, call (415) 485-6257 or send an e-mail to mcl@marinconservationleague.org.

Affordable Housing

continued from page 1

"Significant new development at this site would create many problems," says Haehl. "It would require more roads and water and sewer services. It would have significant environmental impacts, and residents would have to rely on their cars, adding to traffic congestion."

Salt Marsh Ecosystem

continued from page 4

such as bacteria, which in turn feed larger organisms such as worms, mussels, and clams. Hundreds of thousands of local and migratory waterfowl, shore birds, and fish depend on these worms and shellfish. And young fish and crustaceans find shelter in the salt marsh sloughs.

Because it has been so easy over the past 150 years to dike and fill salt marshes to convert them to upland, only 20 percent of the Bay's historic salt marshes remain, endangering several species that depend on them. But the remaining tidal marshes, together with diked historic tidal lands and adjacent uplands, form a vital complex of habitats worthy of exploration.

Kathy Cuneo is a biologist, educator, and co-chair of MCL's Creeks, Wetlands, and Watersheds Committee. On Oct. 24, she'll lead an on-site salt marsh workshop with Nona Dennis, a retired environmental consultant and educator. See page 6 for details.

Committee Meetings

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

Creeks, Wetlands & Watersheds
Meets third Thursday at 4 p.m.
Chairs: Sarah Allen & 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

Marin Conservation League
1623A Fifth Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

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

Executive Director
J. Scott Feierabend

Office Manager
Patricia Sisco

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

Contact us at:

Phone: (415) 485-6257
Fax: (415) 485-6259

mcl@marinconservationleague.org
www.marinconservationleague.org

Printed on 100 percent recycled paper using soy-based inks.

NEWS

SEPTEMBER –OCTOBER 2004

U.S. Postage Paid
Nonprofit Organization
Permit No. 151
San Rafael CA

Address Service Requested

Our Lasting Legacy

Early Action Saved Marin Shorelands

Wetlands and marshlands are crucial pieces of Marin's environment. The county is surrounded by water on three sides; its hills and mountains form a complex and beautiful landscape of diverse habitats and microclimates that support an amazing range of flora and fauna—much of it rare and endangered.

Long before saving wetlands became a well-publicized cause, MCL fought to preserve and protect these areas. As a result, Bolinas Lagoon is home to harbor seals and shorebirds instead of serving as a deep-dredged yacht basin, and the western shore of Tomales Bay is protected as a state park and national recreation area.

Along the eastern edge of the county, significant portions of shoreline are wetlands that help keep the bay healthy and provide rest stops for migratory birds. Without the vigilance and action of MCL and others, areas such as the Bahia Wetlands, Heerdt Marsh, Starkweather Shoreline Park, and the Corte Madera tidelands would be filled in and developed, and the ducks, songbirds, shorebirds, frogs, and myriad wildlife that thrive among reeds and grasses would not be here.

For a firsthand look at one of these valuable wetlands, go with MCL experts to investigate the China Camp State Park salt marsh on Oct. 24. Details are at right.

MCL FIELD TRIP

Explore the China Camp Salt Marsh

Learn about the history, wildlife, and ecological importance of the salt marsh—one of San Francisco Bay's richest most productive ecosystems—at MCL's hands-on outdoor workshop at China Camp State Park east of San Rafael.

MCL wetlands experts and longtime educators Kathy Cuneo and Nona Dennis will lead the expedition on October 24. It starts at 8:30 a.m., to catch the marsh in midtide, and ends at 11:30. Bring your lunch (we'll eat following the workshop) and wear layers!

The workshop is free, but enrollment is limited. To sign up or get details, send a note to mcl@marinconservationleague.org or call (415) 485-6257.