

Clear Lake could benefit from proposed state conservancy taking in 13 counties

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | April 17, 2016, 9:19PM

Public officials and environmentalists in Lake County are hopeful a proposal working its way through the state Legislature could bring much-needed money to fund efforts to clean up Clear Lake and restore surrounding wetlands.

Senate Bill 1396, authored by state Senator Lois Wolk, D-Davis, and Assemblyman Bill Dodd, D-Napa, would establish a new state conservancy stretching from Solano County to the Oregon border. It would expand protections and enhance restoration of natural resources within all or parts of 13 counties, including Lake, Mendocino and Napa.

The bill was approved 6-2 last week by the Senate Committee on National Resources and Water.

Backers of the bill in resource-rich but cash-poor Lake County are hoping the conservancy will materialize, opening up new funding for efforts to improve the water quality of Clear Lake, the county's primary tourism draw and economic engine. The lake — California's second largest after Tahoe — suffers from algae overgrowth and mercury contamination and is in danger of being invaded by destructive non-native mussels.

"We have not been able to funnel money in to take care of (Clear Lake) properly. It's a very important natural resource," said Lake County Supervisor Jim Steele, a retired Fish and Game biologist.

"It could be a tremendous boost to this whole region," said Lake County resident

Victoria Brandon, chair of the Sierra Club's Redwood Chapter.

The bill would create the Inner Coast Range Conservancy, bringing to 11 the number of state conservancies in California. They include the Coastal Conservancy, the California Tahoe Conservancy and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

As proposed, the conservancy would encompass 9.5 million acres of public and private land, said Bob Schneider, senior policy director of Tuleyome, the conservation group spearheading the effort. It also launched the successful push to create the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument, which is within the proposed conservancy area.

Schneider said he initiated the conservancy process largely because the land and people within its proposed boundaries are losing out on millions of dollars in grant and bond funding that is available to surrounding areas that are in conservancies. The taxpayer funds support a wide range of land and water conservation and restoration projects.

"We're kind of the blank spot on the map," Schneider said.

Lake County has long been in search of funding that could support projects aimed at improving the water quality in Clear Lake. Slated efforts include a nearly \$50 million restoration to return about 1,600 acres on the northwestern shore to wetlands by knocking down more than 14 miles of levees, many of which don't meet current standards.

Launched more than a decade ago, the Middle Creek Project has been slowed by funding shortfalls and, to some degree, landowners who have not wanted to sell land in the project area, especially when land values plummeted, officials said.

There also have been proposals to restore other nearby wetlands that, combined with the Middle Creek project, would bring back more than half of the nearly 8,000 acres of wetlands lost or damaged in the Clear Lake Basin in the past century, according to county officials.

The restored wetlands would filter runoff and streams that feed Clear Lake, reducing mercury contamination from old mines and nutrients that promote the algae overgrowth that plagues the ancient lake, estimated to be more than 2.5 million years old.

County supervisors have attempted three times to get voter approval for a sales tax aimed at benefiting the lake. All three tax measures narrowly failed. The last proposal was in 2014.

“We are hopeful that the formation of this conservancy, which includes Clear Lake, will assist us in securing federal and/or state grant money to assist us with our efforts to restore wetlands and improve water quality,” Lake County Supervisor Tony Farrington said.

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