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Gray Matters: Finding a balance

By Maureen McGarry, For the Times-Standard



NCRLT Project Manager Kerry McNamee, left, and board member Rees Hughes survey the wetland area at Freshwater Farms Reserve.

A brand new red roof cloaks the landmark barn at Freshwater Farms Reserve just south of the Three Corners intersection of Myrtle Avenue and Freshwater Road. The property is owned and managed by the Northcoast Regional Land Trust, which has helped conserve over 25,000 acres since 2000.

“We work in partnership with private landowners to help protect and steward wild and working lands — keeping ranches and forestlands whole and avoiding subdivisions,” said Mike Cipra, executive director of NCRLT.

At the Freshwater Farms Reserve, NCRLT has been working in collaboration with U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the California State Coastal Conservancy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California Conservation Corps and local volunteers to restore the wetland area on the property.



A new red roof on the barn can be seen by passersby on Myrtle Avenue near Freshwater Road.

Cipra speaks with enthusiasm and encouragement about the life that is coming back to the wetland.

“The salmon are using the habitat that we and our partners created,” Cipra said. “They are growing fast and thriving. At the same time, this property continues to be used for sustainable agriculture. It’s all about finding a balance between crops, cows and coho.”

Although there is uncertainty about the future of some of these government agencies as partners, Cipra remains positive about the valuable work that has been done and says, “It is empowering to be part of the solution. Working together, we are helping create places where juvenile salmon can eat, grow fast and survive the trip to the ocean.”

On Sunday, NCRLT is having a Watershed Awareness Planting Party that will focus on revegetating the second phase of Wood Creek that flows through the property. Volunteers are needed to help replant native wetland plants. RSVP is working in collaboration with NCRLT and the Watershed Stewards Program to recruit community volunteers to get involved.

Cipra explains that the mission of NCRLT is to blend agricultural use, restoration activities, public education and recreation all in one space at the Freshwater Farms Reserve.

“It is a living laboratory of compatible land use. The vision we have for this property embodies the vision of the Land Trust,” said Cipra. “We are trying to create an ecosystem that is healthy, that has integrity, and continues to produce food and inspiration for our community.”

Volunteer work with NCRLT is about being part of something that is growing, active and alive whether it involves agriculture or restoration work. Cipra feels that both can work in harmony.

Adjacent to the barn is a greenhouse. The plan is to grow native plants that will be planted this summer by volunteers. Volunteers are also needed to help keep the public access Freshwater Nature Trail clear by cutting back grass and branches.

Kerry McNamee, NCRLT project manager, has a full calendar of volunteer opportunities planned. Besides Sunday's Wood Creek Planting Party, there will be an April 23 Earth Day Stewardship Sunday. Then, on May 21 and on June 25, there will more opportunities for volunteers to get involved.

McNamee says that new volunteer skills will be needed for a July 16 workday. This will involve learning how to monitor, measure, and identify plants and record data.

"We need to see what is working and what is not," McNamee said.

McNamee is also excited about the success of the project so far. "In 2009, we planted 44,000 native plants with community help. This wetland has gone from being 17 percent native plants to 80 percent native plants."

"Our area is amazing in terms of open space," said Cipra. "We want to work with our community to conserve it."

Be part of this growing experience and growing project. For more information, email info@ncrlt.org or go to www.ncrlt.org and sign up for regular email updates.

Maureen McGarry is the project director for RSVP/VCOR, a program of the Area 1 Agency on Aging.